



Alone: A Stranger Doctor Story by Andromeda's Girl

Category: Doctor Who, Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: 13th Doctor, Dustin H., Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-10-30 13:38:35

Updated: 2019-06-27 12:09:37

Packaged: 2019-12-12 03:46:42

Rating: T

Chapters: 13

Words: 46,404

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: For sure, they thought they had seen it all when their friend Will went missing and they found a strange girl in the woods. When they thought things couldn't get more stranger, however, their courage is once more tested as they find a rather weird woman, dressed in torn clothes. OR: The tale of a lone girl re-encountering the Mad Man with a box.

1. Prologue

Prologue

Alone.

Yes, that was the word. That was the best word to describe all of the cold, the pain coursing through her body, the pressing, dark feeling in her mind. The Bad Men had hurt her for sure; they had grabbed her arms, pinching her skin as they dragged her away from papa. She hadn't exactly understood why they did it. She never did. But the fact was that they had; they had dragged her away, all the way to the small, scary room with its frightening walls and its nasty, empty floor. They had thrown her down, hurting her again, not caring about her cries or screams. Not caring about her *pain*. She had pleaded; pleaded to let her out. She didn't know what she had done wrong, but she was willing to make up for it. If it meant she would not be alone anymore, she would make up for it.

Alone.

Oh, yes, there was the pain. The pain of her sore arms and the places where her skin was flushing red; where they had pinched her. But that, of course, was only the kind of pain you could take away with a bit of that cold stuff which they called ice. She liked to think of it as "outside pain". But deep inside her was a different kind of pain, the kind that didn't want to go away, the one that seemed to get worse every time she was locked up in this cold, empty room. It was the pain of the walls not responding to her tears, the pain of the floor being icy and unwelcome as she rested her tired head against it, longing for a pair of hands which would cuddle her to sleep as she slowly drifted away in the darkness. It was the kind of pain with only one name.

Alone.

Oh, they would let her out again. Eventually. Papa would wait for her when they brought her back to him, and he would always tell her that if she refused to listen to him again, they would take her back to the empty room, locking her up a little longer than the last time. She

didn't want to, of course, but it wouldn't matter. Papa would always ask things of her that she didn't want to do, because they were bad things. In the end, it was just the same cycle over and over again. The empty room, the bad things, the empty room, the bad things... and in the middle of it all was the pain she carried around as if it were just as normal and regular as having ten fingers, or a nose. But she never got used to it. She never would.

Alone.

There was one time, though, when something else happened. When someone managed to take some of the pain away. She didn't really remember it very well because it had all seemed so untrue, so weird and new, but she knew it had happened. She did have a vague memory of it, of lying on the cold floor, trying to get some sleep. (She preferred sleep over being awake in the empty room, although there were still the nightmares that haunted her) But suddenly, all the fatigue she had disappeared as if it had simply never existed. She had heard a sound. A weird, wheezing sound, coming from outside the door. She had gotten up and pressed her ear against the surface, but after a loud, resounding *thud*, there was nothing but silence.

She had contemplated for a minute, knowing that papa and the Bad Men would surely hurt her if she opened it, but somehow she had a slight feeling there would be no punishment. So she concentrated, focusing on the lock as it made a soft *click*, the door slowly swinging open.

She had no clear memory of what had happened after that. She recalled there being blue, and a bright, warm light. Creaking when another door opened. She recalled being a bit scared, fascinated by these new, unknown things.

But there was no pain. No *alone*.

2. Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The Woman Who Fell To Hawkins

The paper crinkled as Joyce wrestled to pull the phone out of the package, spilling chunks of brown cardboard in the process. Damn it. If she wouldn't be more careful, the whole thing would end up in pieces before she had even gotten around to try it. The thing was that being careful wasn't among the best of her qualities – at least not now. Not while she was walking the thin line between utter hell and sheer panic. *Oh, for God's sake, would you give me a break? He's missing! No time to be messing around!*

Yet, and she did realize this very clearly, breaking anything would be the last thing to contribute to finding her son now. So she tried to compose herself for a bit, taking deep breaths before she gave a firm tug and finally managed to get the phone out of its package. The box fell on the ground, the handset nearly following its example as she lost grip of it and it went sailing to the floor. She managed to grab onto it for the last second, still taking deep breaths as she put it back. Her hands were shaking and her legs weren't doing far better, either.

See. There you go. I'm calm, I'm very calm, and now I'm going to put this damned piece of scrap into place to speak to my lost son.

There mere thought of it was nearly enough to make her giggle. For sure, Joyce was going to pull it off. A whole posse was out there looking for him, not finding anything even after looking for a godawful amount of time in those godforsaken woods, but fear not, ladies and gentlemen: Joyce Byers would have the fucking scoop. And how? Well, by giving him a friendly call, of course.

As she went to connect the phone, she wondered whether anyone would believe her. Jonathan believed her, although he still had his doubts. She was even more curious as to why, actually. He had been there, right? He had heard the thing ringing? It would have been a different story if he hadn't, like Hopper, who believed all of this to be one big joke. She wasn't sure, but she believed he even gave it the honor of dubbing it one of Mr. Jim Hopper's-fantastic-titles, or, as he liked to call it, his "special kind of honky-donkey-horseshit".

But he hadn't heard it! Didn't matter. She had. And she'd be damned if it hadn't been Will's breathing, the frightening, little asthmatic gasps he emitted whenever he was scared. Oh God, she remembered now: he had been scared, by whatever that freaking... *thing* was. That growling didn't belong to a normal animal and she was well aware of it. Didn't matter. Not yet, at least. Her entire existence was reduced to small, separate facts and she had to focus on just one of them: Will was lost, and she had to find him. All other things were secondary.

After connecting the phone, she dragged it across the living room to find a proper place to put it down, but she suddenly felt it being nearly ripped from her hands as she struggled to keep her balance. She turned around, ready to respond with a complete breakdown to this new obstacle, but it proved to be a laughable minor one; the cord simply wasn't long enough. Frustrated and cursing under her breath, she looked around, trying to find a table or a cabinet. There was nothing, at least, nothing she could move without some help. Fine. Sniffing, she turned the nearest armchair around and fell down on it, then proceeded to push it towards the connecting panel. Placing the telephone right in front of her, she finally allowed herself to ease down a bit, and she drew a long, tense breath.

Then she waited.

Time passed. She didn't know whether it was just a matter of seconds, of minutes, perhaps hours. She'd swear she had been alert the whole time, although there wasn't a complete truth to this, since she felt herself slowly drifting away as time progressed. She wouldn't exactly call it sleeping; it was more a kind of trance-state. She had dreams. Maybe not dreams, maybe visions, maybe predictions, or maybe both. Will being alone. Will being chased by something big, something dark. Will finding a shelter, but it wouldn't open. *Why wouldn't it fucking open?*

Then there came the doubts. What if he wouldn't be able to call her again? Or what if the phone would indeed ring, but when she'd pick it up, she wouldn't hear anything but a slight, menacing growling? What if she would hear him *dying*?

No, she wouldn't. It couldn't be. The phone would ring, she would pick it up and she would hear his voice again; she would tell him to

calm down (although she might've forgotten a tiny bit about her own paper-thin sanity there) and push him to tell her where he was. There was simply no other possibility. Clinging on to this thought like a castaway would cling to a life buoy, she waited, slowly drifting in the darkness.

When it finally rang, she felt herself nearly being unable to move. Hands still trembling, she picked it up, and almost screamed as she asked: "Hello? Hello? *Will?*"

Oh God, it was him. It really was *him*. She heard his small, shivering gasps, the heartbreaking fear in his breath as she listened. She repeated his name over and over, probably more to convince herself that she was really speaking to her son, but before she could ask anything else, she suddenly heard other sounds. The growling. No... not *just* the growling. There was a different sound as well. She first didn't hear it as she mistook it for interference, then realized this was anything but a normal phone call... *if* it was even a phone call. She listened carefully, trying to make out its source. It was a bit of a wheezing sound, but it sounded rather broken, as if it was a machine struggling with kicking in. It continued for four or five more seconds, then fell silent.

"Hello? Will? Will? Are you the-"

Joyce yelped as the handset short-circuited. She stared at the black speakers for a second, then threw the whole thing away as she buried her face in her hands. *Why? Just why is the universe so damn persistent in taking him away from me?*

She could hardly control herself, tears burning behind her eyes as she fell to her knees. She was not crazy; she was now certain that it had been her own son's breathing, although she had no clue what the other sounds meant or what their sources where. Was he in danger? Well, yes, how would you otherwise explain that he sounded like he was on the verge of collapsing? And then she hadn't even started about that awful growling she'd heard... although the wheezing sound was just weird. It had sounded out of place. Of course, nearly everything was out of place, but... how would you say that? It just, it didn't fit?

Oh, what was the point. The phone was fried again. She would have to get back to Donald for another one, although he would surely be more hesitant this time. Not to mention how he would react when she would show up again, and again, and again, until the point where the whole house would be stocked with short-circuited phones. But there had to be another way, right? It just had to be...

But that was all before she noticed that the lights had started flickering. Carefully, she got up and proceeded to follow them, determined to find her son.

Of course, Eleven had already noticed the wound on his chin, but she hadn't dared to ask him about it until they had gotten off their bikes and went into the woods. And she knew it wasn't just a scratch he got from an accident, because he seemed rather thoughtful about it. Almost as if it was pestering him. She found it hard to admit, but she almost vaguely recognized the emotions in his dejected face.

So she decided to go ahead and ask: "Why did they hurt you?"

Mike looked up, almost startled. Yeah, now she was *absolutely* certain it wasn't just a scratch. "What?"

She pointed to his chin. He looked down again. "Oh, that. Uh, I just fell at recess."

Eleven didn't know why, but his rejection hurt her a little. Maybe it was because it made her remember something – although she couldn't exactly make out what it was supposed to be. All the previous flashbacks she'd had had been clear, almost like pictures, but this one seemed to be buried under deep layers of dust and darkness. All she knew was that it stung her. And she didn't want Mike to lie to her.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Friends tell the truth," she simply said. Mike looked at her for a few seconds, not quite sure what to say, then sighed. "I was tripped by

this mouth breather, Troy, okay?"

"Mouth breather? The word sounded funny.

"Yeah, you know, a dumb person. A knucklehead."

"Knucklehead?"

He sighed again. "I don't know why I just didn't tell you. Everyone at school knows. I... I just didn't want you to think I was such a wastoid, you know?"

Even though he used all these words that didn't even remotely make sense to her (although she'd make sure to remember that word... *mouth breather?*), she was almost sure she completely understood him. Papa had used this word a couple of times, *impressive*, which she thought was a good word to explain Mike's behavior. Papa had always asked her to *impress* people because then the people would give him money so that he wouldn't have to bring her back to the empty room. She guessed Mike now wanted to *impress* her so that... well, maybe he was afraid she wouldn't like him. But that wasn't true. She did like him. In fact, the sensation of someone wanting to *impress* her awoke a certain feeling in her – a warm kind of feeling she'd never encountered before, although it felt so *good*.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I understand." she said, nodding to stress the last word.

"Oh." He seemed surprised. "Okay, cool."

She smiled. "Cool."

They continued their search through the forest, making sure to check every tree and bush they came across, although it became more difficult as the sun was slowly starting to set and the shadows were growing. As they started to enter the area surrounding the Byers house, Mike turned around and shouted: "Hey, found anything yet?"

"Nope!" Dustin shouted back. "But I swore I saw something moving

just now!"

"That was a squirrel, you idiot." Lucas replied, rolling his eyes.

"Well, how are you so sure?"

"Because it had a tail."

"So?" Dustin asked, sounding offended. "You couldn't even see it clearly."

"Oh, let me correct then, sir: it was the *shadow* of a squirrel," Lucas replied again, rolling his eyes even more dramatically. As the two continued their bickering, Mike sighed and turned to Eleven again. "Well, I'm sure *that* helps a lot."

Eleven didn't respond.

"Do you think we're close now?"

"Yes," she said. "Close."

"Okay, good." He took a deep breath and squeezed the handles of his bike. "Do you remember how he looked when you saw him? Like, did he look okay?"

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Well. Healthy. I don't know, he probably looked scared, but did he look good from the outside?"

She just stared at him, her brown eyes curiously studying his face. He sighed and nearly felt the urge throw his hands into the air, but timely remembered he was holding a bike. "You know what, never mind. Just show us where he is."

She nodded and increased her pace a bit, now more leading instead of just walking along. They kept walking through dense forest for a while, but as the tip of the sun finally disappeared behind the horizon and the sky turned a deep crimson red, the loose leaves under their feet gradually turned into gravel. By the time it was practically dark, they suddenly were out of the woods and stood on a open terrain,

just a stone throw's away from the cozily lit Byers house.

"Here," Eleven said.

Catching up with her, Mike stood beside her as the wheels of his bike came to rest. "Yeah, this is where Will lives."

She looked at him. "Hiding."

"No, no, this is where he lives. He's missing from here. Understand?"

Dustin and Lucas finally caught up with them as well, both slightly panting from their last sprint – and now both regretting the decision to have a discussion about whether someone would die from dehydration after four days or one week in the meanwhile. "What are we doing here?"

"She said he's hiding here." Mike said.

"Um, no!" Dustin piped up. "I swear, if we walked all the way out here for nothing..."

"That's exactly what we did!" Turning to Mike, Lucas sneered: "I told you she didn't know what the hell she was talking about!"

Mike ignored him. He wasn't exactly sure whether he truly believed Eleven was right or he just wanted her to be right – but either way, she had a reason for bringing them here. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Mike, don't waste your time with her." Lucas said as he reached an arm out. Mike slapped it away. "What do you want to do then?"

"Call the cops, like we should have done yesterday."

"Listen. We are *not* calling the cops," Mike said, unconsciously stepping in front of Eleven.

"Uh, hey, guys?" Dustin asked.

"What other choice do we have?" Lucas asked, now stepping forward as well. "Do you want to keep walking around with her? What if they

arrest us for helping a lunatic?"

"*She's not a lunatic!*" Mike yelled.

"*She closed a door with her mind!*"

"*Why do you have to be such an ass-*"

"*Guys!*" Dustin screamed, his voice breaking. Both boys looked over to him, nearly in position to go at each other throats. Eleven cowered behind Mike's back. It was funny; Dustin just had to stick up one finger, and they immediately forgot their fight and went to stay beside him.

Lucas was the first to speak up: "What the hell is *that*?"

"A meteor, or something?" Dustin asked.

At first they all agreed it was a meteor as it was too bright to make out a clear form, but when it started to approach them, they weren't so sure anymore. They watched in awe as the object plummeted down, weird, feather-like flaps on its sides. It fell for two more minutes or so before it finally reached the top of the forest and went crashing through the branches. They heard a loud crash when it fell on the ground, then listened as the silence abruptly settled down again. The crickets were sort-of-scary to listen to on their own.

Dustin was certain: "Definitely a meteor."

"No, I don't think so." Mike said. "It looked like a person. I think we should check it out."

"What are you talking about?" Lucas asked. "*If* it was a person, they're good as dead. No one survives a fall that high."

"Well, we could just... have a look right?"

"I kinda want to see a corpse," Dustin chimed in.

"Man, that's just sick." Lucas looked up as though he asked what madness he was getting himself into before he let out a deep sigh. "Alright then. We just look. But if they're dead, and they will be, we

go straight to the police to report it, alright?"

Dustin nodded. "Fine by me."

Mike turned around to see what Eleven had to say about their new discovery, but she seemed surprisingly comfortable with it all, just studying them with curious eyes. He then sighed and finally gave in: "Okay, let's do it."

Setting out to find the mysterious person that fell to earth, they walked back into the woods, leaving the warm lights of the Byers house behind as the crunching of the leaves under their feet slowly faded away.

3. Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The alien

It was a woman.

The impact had been big enough to make a small crater, with walls covered in plowed soil and a couple of persistent leaves. She was lying in the middle of it, on her side, rather peaceful, as if she was just sleeping. They had been able to identify her gender particularly by her small size; her face was hidden behind a muddled mess of blonde hair, although they could make out a couple of lips and a nose.

"Doesn't look like an alien," Lucas said. They stood a few steps away from the edge of the crater, shining their flashlights on the limp body. Eleven stood behind Mike, taking everything in as she peeked over his shoulder.

"Man, I bet you it's an alien," Dustin said. "That's just a disguise."

"No it's not,"

"Oh, you wanna bet?" he turned to his friend. "Three dollars."

"I'm not gonna bet for money!"

"Oh, okay. Your Wolverine Limited Series then?"

Lucas' jaw nearly dropped to his feet. "Are you crazy? That's a damn collector's item, man!"

"I know, that's why I asked."

"Guys, can you focus for a second?" Mike asked, shaking his head. "What are those clothes?"

"I dunno, maybe it's a hobo?" Lucas replied.

"*Space-hobo*," Dustin said.

"Man you're just full of sh-"

"Because they don't seem like woman's clothes to me," Mike quickly interrupted, starting to walk along the edge. "Or maybe they're like, expensive business clothes. What if she fell out of a plane?"

Lucas shrugged. "Well, then she's dead."

"But I don't see any blood," Dustin said. "Or broken bones."

"She probably died from internal bleeding."

"Could be. But I expected her to be, you know, more flat."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "You're just incredible."

Eleven had been quietly observing all of it until now, but now she carefully treaded forward, keeping her eyes on the motionless woman. By the time Mike finally understood what she was doing, she had already jumped into the crater. "El!" He yelled, pointing his flashlight her. "What are you doing?"

Eleven didn't reply. She kneeled down, slightly bowing her head, as if she was an animal studying its prey. The boys kept looking with open mouths as she wiped some strands of blonde hair out of the woman's eyes. In those few seconds there was a certain word that arose in her, although she couldn't quite tell what it was. Maybe it had to do something with the vague thing she remembered when Mike lied to her. Before she could further think about it, though, the woman's head slightly jerked. Eleven quickly stepped back as the boys yelped.

"Did you see that?" Dustin cried.

"Wait, was that the weirdo?" Lucas asked.

Mike opened his mouth to answer, but felt himself nearly freeze as the woman suddenly groaned. She slowly rolled on her back, as if she was just waking up, then moved almost unnaturally fast as her eyes popped open and she sat up. "My days, thought my head was explodin' for a sec..."

She noticed the boys and turned towards them. Expecting her to

erupt in some kind of crazed chant they took a few steps backwards, but she just asked: "And what happened to *you*?"

"Huh?" Lucas said.

"Well, you sure look a lot younger than the last time I saw ya. Ow do, still playin' all the hits?"

"No way," Dustin whispered, "a *British* alien?"

Lucas gave him a subtle push. "Shut up,"

"Speakin' of which," the woman said, turning to Mike, "I actually found your guitar, Paul! It wasn't even lost! Well, sorta, considerin' you put it in a never-endin' time loop that nearly wiped out half of the universe, but we all make mistakes. Just be a little more careful where you put away your stuff next time, alright?"

Mike just looked at her dumbfounded, not quite sure what to say. Before anyone could say anything, the woman had already turned around and smiled to Dustin. "And you look absolutely fabulous, Ringo! Love what you did with the hair. Stylin' it a little less daft, aren't ya?"

Dustin just gazed at her. Mike finally found the sense to speak up: "Uh, ma'am, we're not the Beatles."

The woman frowned. "Aren't you? Well, now that you're mentionin' it, you lot look a tad young actually... oh, stupid, stupid!" She slapped her forehead a few times, then stuck a finger in her nose. "Oh, this isn't the sixties at all! Bit mushy, slight hint of a tech revolution, big haircuts, oh, and that nasty epidemic... eighties?"

"1983," Mike said, rather quietly. "1984 in a month."

"Oh dear," The woman now looked a bit worried. "That's a problem. A rather big problem, actually. I wouldn't say it is very good at all." Noticing Eleven, she frowned again as the girl cautiously took a step backwards. "No good... oh well, that's for another day. Would you lot happen to know how I ended up here?"

"Well, you fell from the sky out of nowhere," Lucas said. "We almost

thought you were dead,"

"Did I?" the woman asked, surprised. "Glad I'm still in one piece then. A bit shaken up, I'd say, but alright. I'm slowly startin' to remember now..."

Mike sighed. "Look, ma'am..."

"Why do you keep calling me ma'am?"

"Excuse me?" He now looked at her as if she was truly crazy. Which he still considered an option actually, judging by how crazy this whole situation was getting. "Don't you know what you look like?"

"Well, I remember some things, but... I sort of forgot. Drives me round the bend, really." She cracked an awkward smile. "Memory's still restorin'. I got the big chunks, but I'm afraid the missin' pieces are takin' their time."

"Uh, okay. I guess... in case you didn't notice yet, you're a woman."

"Oh, am I?" The woman raised her eyebrows. "I already felt like somethin' was off... does it suit me?"

"What?"

"I'm so sorry, honestly. This is all just a tad new to me. Not to mention that I was a white haired Scotsman just an half hour ago,"

Mike blinked a few times. "What are you-"

"Long story, I'll explain later. So, four kids out in the woods, late at night," the woman said as she climbed out of the crater. "Don't you all have parents worrying about you?"

"None of your business," Lucas scoffed. Dustin nudged him, causing his friend to cast him a frustrated glance. "What?" he mouthed.

"*Alien*," Dustin whispered.

"Oh, shut up man, really. She's crazy,"

"Crazy or genius?"

"What are you even-"

"We're looking for our missing friend," Mike said. "He disappeared three days ago."

"Did he? Well, that's no good. But I guess I can handle another problem. I like to challenge myself, after all."

"Do you mean you want to help?"

"Course I want to help!" the woman said, almost offended. "What else would you expect me to do, sit around doin' nothin'?"

"But we don't even know who you are!" Mike almost shouted. He waved for Eleven and helped her climb out of the crater, then quickly followed her as she started to walk into the woods.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you... once I remember. But so far there's one thing I'm absolutely certain about and I don't want to ignore it."

"...and that is?"

She abruptly turned around, scaring the kids as they stopped in their tracks. "I've forgotten almost everythin'. I'm practically rediscoverin' myself and to be honest with you, that scares me to death with all these new and sudden things, but I do know that whenever someone needs help, I never refuse. It's a bit like... like floatin' in a big, open ocean and this is the only certainty I can clin' to. Makes sense?"

"I guess so..."

"Brilliant! Now then, you said your friend went missin', but where?" she asked as she went on, the kids following.

"Guys, I don't feel comfortable with this." Lucas whispered as they came together to deliberate. "I mean, I don't know how it seems to you, but I think she's nuts."

"Dude, she's an alien with memory loss,"

"Could you just quit that shit for one second? Aliens don't exist!"

"Why not? We found a girl with psychic powers, right so-"

"Just leave Eleven out of this," Mike said. "I don't think she understand what is going on either. Do you, El?"

Eleven shook her head.

"But what if it's a trap?" Lucas asked. "I mean, maybe she really is a lunatic. Maybe she's the same psycho who kidnapped Will and now wants to kidnap us-"

"No, I don't think so." Mike replied. "I think she really wants to help. She has forgotten who she is, but maybe that's just like... a shock, from the fall. If she helps us, that could help her to get her memory back."

"So what, you just go ahead and trust a weird woman you found in the woods?"

"Why don't you ask the weirdo?" Dustin proposed. "She would know if she's a threat, right?"

All three of the boys turned to Eleven, who seemed rather overwhelmed by all the new attention. Mike nodded in an attempt to comfort her. "El, do you... do you think she's a threat? Is she with the Bad Men?"

Eleven looked at the woman, who, after a couple of meters, now seemed to trail off and suddenly stopped to rummage around in her coat. "No," she finally said. "No Bad Men."

"That settles it then," Mike said.

"I really don't know how you guys expect this all to help find Will, but alright," Lucas muttered. "Just don't say I didn't warn you,"

"Dude, maybe if she's found her spaceship, she'll take us with her!"

"Jesus, Dustin, she's *not* an *alien*!"

"No? You want to give it a shot?" Before anyone could say anything, Dustin had already turned around and shouted: "Hey, ma'am, are you an alien?"

"Well, yeah!" The woman turned around, an indignant look on her face. "Don't say that like it's offensive!"

Dustin almost couldn't hide his triumphant smile. "Told you,"

"That says nothing. She's just confused."

"Guys, let's give it a rest, okay? We'll have to go on and look for Will. The more people we got, the better."

"Okay, fine. Shouldn't we be getting home anyway?"

"In a sec. Let's just go have a look at his house,"

"But what the heck are you expecting to find there!"

"Oh Jesus, are you gonna keep complaining? Come on!" Mike groaned. Not giving Lucas the chance to respond, he turned and started to follow the woman, Eleven and Dustin quickly following him. Lucas sighed, then threw his hands in the air and went after them. For sure, it was now practically impossible that things would get any stranger, right?

"...so you fell out of your spaceship?" Dustin asked. He'd been cross examining the woman ever since they caught up with her, although there weren't many questions she could answer – either she'd trail off in a nonsense rambling or she would get stuck after a couple of words. By the time they reached the edge of the forest, however, he had already found out she had seen the submerging of Atlantis ("someone just pulled the plug"), hated pears ("nasty green round-curved invaders") and actually *had been* a white-haired Scotsman half an hour ago.

"Sort of, yeah." the woman replied.

"Wow. What does it look like? Is it a flying saucer?"

"What?" She pulled a weird face. "No, *she* is not a saucer. She's more of a box, honestly."

"With guns and lasers?"

"No, 'course not. What would I need those for? I'm here to solve problems, not to create them."

"Oh. Alright." Dustin said, disappointed. The idea of a spaceship without any guns just seemed weird to him – not *only* because it looked cool, of course, but also because there were tons of dangers out there. You'd just have to watch *Alien* to prove that point. Would Ripley have survived without any guns?

"But it can travel through space, right?"

"Space *and* time. Weren't you payin' attention?"

Dustin put his hands up in an innocent gesture. "Sorry. That's so cool, though. So... where is it right now?"

To his surprise, the woman shrugged. "Wouldn't have the slightest clue. She seemed a bit shaken up by all the change, so I wouldn't expect her anywhere in the near future. Silly old box."

"Right, because you... were a man half an hour ago."

"Does that surprise you?"

Dustin shrugged. "Well, kinda. It's just like complete regeneration, right?"

The woman suddenly stopped in her tracks, looking very impressed. "Exactly! What, are you top of the class at biology or somethin'?"

"Uh, no. I just know 'cause Wolverine can do it too."

The woman resumed walking, shaking her head. "'Course you did. If there's somethin' no one could beat humanity to, it's delegitimizin' everythin' they don't believe. Just promise you'll remind me to show you that time-travel is real, alright?"

Dustin smiled. "Awesome."

A few meters behind them Mike and Eleven followed, with a very annoyed-looking Lucas at their heels. Eleven didn't seem scared by the weird woman; quite the opposite. She kept staring her, a surprised look on her face. Mike grinned. "You like her, don't you?"

She quickly looked down, not feeling the need to answer. Mike shrugged. "I think she's alright. A bit weird, but alright."

"Mad?"

He looked up, surprised. "Uh, yeah, I... I guess. You don't know her, right?"

She shook her head, although it took her longer to reply this time. "No."

And perhaps *this* wasn't entirely true, because this particular word, "mad", didn't occur to her until she had stared into the woman's eyes. They had reminded her of something, but she still didn't know exactly what it was. Quite frankly, it scared her. She couldn't tell Mike about it. Not yet.

"Maybe she's-"

"Oi, Paul!" the woman shouted as she turned around. Mike sighed, then replied: "I'm not Paul McCartney, ma'am, the name's Mike!"

"Really? I see... I like that name, honestly. Mike, you said your friend got lost around 'ere, right?"

"Yeah. Eleven said she'd seen him, but she took us to his house just before we found you."

"Did she now? Are you Eleven?"

Eleven hesitantly took a step forward when the woman approached her. Mike actually found himself rather surprised at the woman's careful, calculated movements. Within a matter of seconds, she seemed to lose all of her restless enthusiasm and knelt down before the girl the way a policeman would kneel down to comfort a

lost child. Even Lucas seemed surprised, although he certainly did his best to hide it.

"So, Eleven, you think he is at his house?"

She shook her head. "Hiding."

"Hidin'? That's odd..."

"She said that to us too," Mike said. "But it can't be. I mean, the police would've found him then, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Depends."

"On what?"

"I don't know." The woman got up again. "Lots of problems, lots of questions, excitin', isn't it?"

"Not what I would call exciting," Lucas sighed. "Look, it's getting really dark, maybe we should just get home."

"Uh, guys?" Dustin asked.

"You don't think she's making this up, do you?" Mike scoffed. "If she's bringing us here, there's a reason for it."

"But *what* reason? Do you see Will hiding around here, because I don't!"

"That's because he is *hiding*, you idiot!"

"Oh, you're just-"

"Guys!" Dustin screamed. The boys turned around. "What?"

"Look." He pointed at the road, which suddenly seemed to explode in blue and red lights as a couple of police cars drove by, loud sirens blaring away the peaceful silence of the night. For a second they stared at each other when the cars disappeared again, before Mike was the first to speak up: "Shit."

"Should we check it out?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah, definitely. Come on, where's that weird woman?"

"Hold on, she was just here-"

They suddenly noticed the woman, who was already on the road running in the direction of the police cars, coat flapping behind her like some kind of superhero cape. The boys looked at each other again, dumbfounded. "Eh, what?"

"There's no time. Let's go,"

And off they took again, each one trying to recollect their thoughts as they pedaled as hard as they could to keep up with the strange woman. But there was one thing they were all absolutely certain about: with these two new weird guests, it was hardly possible things would be ever the same again...

4. Chapter 3

[A/N: I prefer to do as little of these messages as possible, but I still wanted to throw one out there for the lovely comments. Thanks, here's a new chapter! 3]

Chapter 3: Stars

Mike wasn't quite sure he understood the feeling of loss, until he did.

What was there to say about it? All of it, the faith he had, the hope of finding Will, the trust he'd put in Eleven, it had all been shattered by that small, yet seemingly endless amount of seconds. Normally he wasn't the one to give up so easily, let alone he was so eager to admit he'd been wrong all the time, but this time... this time was just different. Somehow, the presence of the weird woman had made it all worse. Was it because there was one more person to see how they pulled Will's lifeless body out of the water? Or because there was one more person to witness his outburst against Eleven? In all fairness, he just couldn't help it. The sight of his friend's dead body had unleashed a feeling of utter sadness inside of him, to a point where he just abreacted all of it at the first person he could find. Later thinking about it, it was possibly the stupidest thing he could've done, but he didn't care. She had lied to him. He didn't want to believe it and he really wanted to believe that this wasn't the end of it, that Will wasn't dead, that there was at least a *possibility* that things turned out to be different in the end. Yet... he had a slight feeling it was false hope.

And so he cried.

The woman had taken all of this in with a new instinct she had found in the reassembling mass of cells that was currently her mind and body. It was an ancient instinct, which felt far more familiar to her than she was comfortable with. The sight of the dead boy had meant nothing to her; just another addition to the stockpile of horrific deaths she had witnessed in her long, sometimes more painful than happy life. She was ashamed to admit it, but perhaps it was not true you would never get used to death. Maybe, after all the destruction and pain, you would eventually be unable to make out the thin line between light and darkness. Had it really come this far?

But with a well amount of relief, she also realized that – although this old instinct was a distinct part of her – it certainly wasn't the most defining one. She *did* feel sorry when she saw he heartbroken faces of the boys, the way all the life seemed to seep out of them. In some way, it angered her as well. She liked challenges after all, but it seemed like every challenge so far always had to involve a drastic loss on her side – and this time she didn't even have the familiarity of her TARDIS or companions to lean on. Everything was new, everything (or at least quite a load of it) was hostile, and not for the first time (although she found no comfort in this detail), she was truly afraid to lose.

But she would try.

And you could bet on that.

Of course, the shock that had gripped him after the discovery at the quarry hadn't left much room for sensible thinking, neither did he really feel like hiding two people in his basement, but he didn't have much of a choice. Neither Dustin or Lucas wanted to take up the challenge (although Dustin had shown a particular interest in hiding the woman under his bed so that they could chat about space and time all night), so Mike eventually agreed, and let both Eleven and the woman into his house. Eleven immediately crawled back into her little bedspread tent, only to boost up the walkie-talkie and start toying with it again. Fortunately, the woman was getting a bit less enthusiastic as she retreated to one of the couches in the room, drifting away in her own thoughts as her face contorted in a thoughtful frown. He could see she had trouble with sitting still, but he was just thankful she was quiet. It had impacted her as well, yeah, he'd noticed, but he still wasn't quite sure how to feel about her. Generally, how were you supposed to feel about a so-called alien who fell from the sky? As if one strange girl wasn't enough...

In the end, he just felt tired. He sat on the couch and blankly stared at the darkness on the wall at the other side of the room as he tried to ignore the noise of the walkie-talkie. After what could have been one hour, the woman had finally gotten up and now strolled around the room as she mumbled to herself. She suddenly stopped and, rather uninvited, started to rummage around in one of the boxes.

"Hey, could you stay away from that?" Mike asked. "That's not yours, you know?"

"So sorry. I'll put it back, promise. Just need somethin' to occupy myself with." the woman answered. She dove further into the box and came up with Nancy's old transistor radio. "There. Mind if I fiddle around with this for a bit?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Go ahead. Just don't make a mess of it."

"Thanks. I wouldn't ask it if it wasn't necessary, but my thoughts could use a bit of a distraction."

She sat down and proceeded to tear the back off the old machine, her tongue sticking out between her lips. Well, there he had it. Trying to process the death of his best friend in a mushy basement with two girls messing around with some dumb appliances. Could it get any worse?

After a couple of minutes, the woman put the radio on the floor and sighed, blowing a couple of strands from her face. "No, that's no good."

"You done?" Mike mumbled.

"Sort of. Well, yeah. I gave it a little upgrade. It can now transmit all five kinds of brainwaves. Nice practice, but it hasn't worked at all. I'm still stuck."

"Well, good for you... Can you please stop that?"

He casted Eleven an annoyed glance. She looked up from the walkie-talkie, an innocent shimmer in her eyes. "I thought we were friends, you know? You said it yourself. Friends tell the truth, and they *definitely* don't lie to each other." He felt his blood starting to boil. "You made me think Will was okay. But he wasn't, and he wasn't out there, either. Maybe you thought you were helping, but you weren't. You hurt me. Do you understand?"

Eleven continued to stare at him, not daring to say anything. "What you did sucks," Mike said, turning away from her and curling up on the couch. "Lucas was right about you. All along."

It went quiet for a bit, until Eleven started fiddling with the walkie-talkie again, though it sounded a little lower this time. She seemed ashamed, cheeks coloring red as she did her best to keep her eyes down. Sure, she understood that he was angry, but it still hurt knowing that *she* had *hurt* him. Those nasty words reminded her of papa. Of the Bad Men, and the lab. She shivered.

The sudden voice that broke the silence came from neither Mike or Eleven, though, it was the woman who spoke up: "Why are you givin' up?"

Mike turned to her. She was standing up, hands stuffed into her pockets.

"What?"

"I asked why you're already givin' up. You know, sayin' your friend is dead."

"Didn't you see the body? That speaks pretty much for itself, doesn't it?" He turned again. "He's gone. Now leave me alone."

The woman seemed to think for a minute, then walked over to the couch and sat down in front of it, cross-legged. "Well... do you believe he's gone or do you know he's gone?"

"What's the difference?"

"Quite a lot, actually." The woman stared into her lap. For a second Mike swore he could see a shadow passing over her face... then again, he couldn't see it clearly as he was just staring from the corner of his eyes.

"I know it's different to comprehend this, Mike, but I'm old. Very old. There are big chunks I still can't remember, but I do remember that I've spent a big part of that long life under the assumption that everyone I loved and cared about was gone. Just gone. I even believed I was the last of my kind. I wasn't even hopin' that they were still out there somewhere, because I *knew* they were gone. Do you understand?"

"I suppose so..." he said, a bit timidly.

"Well, and that's where I learned that there was a clear difference between believin' and knowin'. Because I discovered that all along, I was wrong. They were still out there. I just thought I *knew* that they were gone, but that was a mistake. I was actually just *believin'* they were gone, which is a pretty daft thing to do on its own, if you ask me. Makes sense?"

"Right."

The woman smiled. "There. As long as you keep in mind that hope is a valuable thing, Mike. This friend of yours, John –"

"Will."

"Will. Terribly sorry. Do you think he would want you to give up that easily?"

"I don't know." Mike sighed. "I suppose not. But it's difficult, you know, I mean, the body –"

"You should forget about the body for a sec. Seen lots of bodies, some of them meant nothin'... and they didn't look quite right, for that matter. Do you believe he's still alive?"

He barely dared to look into the woman's eyes, but he couldn't help it – he was practically drawn to them. It was strange. He didn't know eyes could carry an age, at least, they didn't become more sagged and wrinkled like your skin would when you became older, but for a second, he didn't doubt that this woman was an ancient alien from some kind of lost civilization – her eyes were old. Very old.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I do."

And as if his confession was the trigger for a next line of events, the walkie-talkie suddenly cracked and sputtered to life as it started to emit strange sounds. He couldn't believe his ears. From the device came the shivering, almost inaudible voice of a boy, who softly sang: "*So come on and let me know... Should I stay or should I go? Should I stay or should I go now? Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble... If I stay it will be double...*"

"Is that...?" Mike nearly tumbled over the couch as he made his way

over to Eleven, practically crashing into the tent as he grabbed the walkie-talkie. "Hello? Hello? Is that you, Will? *Do you copy? Over!*"

He shook it a couple of times, but it had gone silent, now only emitting a low static. He looked at Eleven. "Was that..."

"Will," she said, her face glowing. The silly look of surprise and happiness that returned to his eyes made her feel warm inside. She could not help but cast the woman a bit of a proud grin as well – and she nodded, showing her appreciation.

"Can you make him come back? Can I talk to him?"

"I don't think it works that way," the woman said, kneeling down. "Likely a one-way street. Can I have a look?"

"Sure." He gave her the walkie-talkie and she proceeded to fidget with it, turning some buttons. "No, it won't transmit. She must've tapped into some kind of telepathic grid."

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

"I don't know!" she answered, rather cheerfully. "But I'll have it figured out in a bit. Some time. Couple of days, maybe." She looked up. "You should get to bed, Mike. Try and have some rest. You might need it to persuade George and Ringo –"

He rolled his eyes. "Dustin and Lucas, ma'am."

"Oh. Yeah. Right. Gonna need some time to adjust to that. Anyhow, you'll know what to do."

"Yeah," he said. He bit his lip, not really daring to look Eleven in the eye – but he just needed to get it over with. After all, he had been a real jerk. "Sorry, El. I should have believed you. I just was upset."

She gave a short answer, but he was surprised about how right the words were. "Thank you. I understand."

"Ya." He nodded, slapped his knees and got up. "I suppose I'll see you guys in the morning then."

"Night," Eleven yawned.

He went on his way to the staircase, but before he reached the last couple of steps, he turned around one more time. "One more question, though."

"Shoot." the woman said.

"How did you know that was going to work?"

"I didn't." She smiled. "Goodnight, Mike."

"Yeah, 'night." He yawned as well, feeling the full fatigue now finally creeping up on him. She was probably right. He was going to need a lot of energy to convince Dustin and Lucas to come over, but he'd make sure they would. You could bet your ass.

He just hoped he'd get enough sleep tonight.

Eleven gasped for breath as she sat up, drops of sweat dripping down her burning forehead. She recognized the bedspreads and the warm light that came from behind them, but the contortions just wouldn't stop. She closed her eyes and opened them again, drawing deep breaths as she fought against the panic. At last, her body finally became aware of its new surroundings, and she slowly started to calm down again. She listened for footsteps or other noises. Maybe someone had heard her. Maybe Mike would come down to comfort her. She'd like that.

Mike didn't come, but she did hear some other noise. She carefully lifted the bedspread on the front, hands trembling, her sweat-soaked sweater sticking to her back. She saw the woman, who was sitting on a box in the far corner of the room, zealously absorbed into messing with whatever the strange device she was holding was. "There... finally got ya, pesky little..."

There suddenly was a loud *zap* and Eleven flinched as a bright flash shot from the device. It hit the woman straight in her face, launching her from the box as she let out a surprised yelp. She landed in the corner, with her legs and their torn pants sticking in the air, like a

pair of ridiculous flag poles. Eleven watched in shock. She was fairly certain the woman was dead (or at least *incapacitated*, a word papa had tended to use often), until she could hear a slight groaning. "And *now* I remember," the woman muttered, sitting up. "Never try to give toasters a gamma boost." She frowned. "Why did I want to make radioactive toast in the first place? Sexy, what did I – oh. That's right. Missin' somethin' there..."

She finally laid eyes on Eleven, who was still peeking from under the bedspread. Lowering her head so that she was on the same level (and nearly making El giggle as she now looked like some kind of oversized cat), she piped up: "Well, hello there. Are you alright? You don't seem alright. Hang on –"

Before El could do anything, the woman had already made her way over to her, kneeling down and peeling the cloth back. "There. Oh, look at you, you're soaked. What's wrong?"

She reached out, causing El to quickly crawl back, staring up at her with big eyes. "Hey, no need to get scared now," she said, gently. "I just want to help you."

She was still a bit hesitant, but she allowed the woman to help her out of her sweater, then shuddered as she wrapped her ragged coat around her. That felt good. The coat was surprisingly comfortable and the filling was soft against her skin. It also smelled nice, but she didn't exactly know what the scents were or what they meant – they were nothing like the sterile odor of the lab.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" the woman said, smiling with utter delight. Eleven nodded, her face now slowly easing into a somewhat relieved smile as well.

"So... do you mind tellin' me what's wrong...?"

El swallowed. "Bad dreams."

"Oh, right. I hate bad dreams," the woman said, pulling a funny, disgusted face. "Well, I don't seem to sleep much anyway, but they're still the worst, don't you think? If you don't mind me askin'... what did you dream about?"

"Home. Bad place."

"Huh." The woman seemed confused. "What do you mean? Home, or a bad place?"

"Home is a bad place," El replied, a bit quietly.

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry to hear that. I can't imagine what that must be like, honestly... or sort of. But you're safe here, right?"

El nodded. She wanted to add a couple of words – *for now* – but strangely, she didn't want to give the woman more things to worry about. She supposed it was because she was slowly starting to warm up to her, but for some reason, there seemed to be a deeper connection... although she didn't want to think about that now.

"That's good to hear. 'Spose it's kind of a nice place. A tad kitschy, but nice."

"Is your home a good place?"

The woman didn't immediately answer – the question must've surprised her. "Well I... uh, I... yeah, I 'spose it is." Suddenly, her entire face seemed to lighten up in some kind of realization; she had gotten an idea. "Say, how about... how about I tell you about my home? You know, to forget about the bad dreams?"

El just nodded, watching in surprise as the woman jumped up and raced to the boxes, starting to trash around in them. "I swore I just saw somethin' lyin' around here... ah right, there it is." She picked it up to inspect it. "Brilliant!"

With the mysterious object clenched under her arm, she ran off to the light switch. Eleven's breath hitched as it suddenly became dark, the blackness filled with all sorts of *thumps* and *booms* as the woman rummaged through the room. After a few seconds, though, she was treated to the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. The woman had placed a kind of light orb on the ground, which projected a whole dark sky filled with little bright spots all over the room. The woman could barely contain her enthusiasm as she sat down next to the girl again. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," Eleven said, mouth agape. "Pretty."

"Now then," the woman began, bringing her voice to an excited, low tone. "Those small lights are called stars. The most magical and beautiful things in the universe, if you think about it. Just imagine billions and billions of balls out there, all burnin' up until they explode and become new stars. Right in front of your eyes. And all you have to do to see them is wait until it's night, go outside and look up. Well, not if it rains, of course. Rain spoils everythin'. But just think about it... all that beauty, just waitin' for you to look up and open your eyes. Almost like magic, don't you think?"

"Outside?"

"Yeah," the woman said, suppressing a giggle. "And somewhere driftin' between the stars are we – well, right now. Planet earth."

"Home?"

"Well, your home. Not quite my home. I mean, I like to think that my home is just between those stars, but..." She sighed. "It's a bit far away, but... somewhere out there is another star, the brightest of them all. Well, it's not quite a star, but I like to think it is. That's Gallifrey."

"Gallifrey?"

"Yeah." She smiled. "If I got the name right, at least. Memory's still a tad unreliable. But if I'm correct, that's my home. With red skies, and endless golden plains, and the majestic citadel... That's where most of my people live."

"Bad people?"

"No, not really... but they have their flaws, even though they would hate to admit that fact. I say, for a noble race that has mastered the power of time-travel and dimension-engineerin', their arrogance is practically ageless."

The woman chuckled a bit.

"Mouth breathers," El muttered. That simply made her cry out in

laughter – and the girl grinned as well.

"Yeah, I 'spose," she giggled, wiping the tears out of her eyes. "Mouth breathers... best term I've heard so far, to be honest. Anyway, I think it's better if you try to get some sleep. Mike will probably need you tomorrow."

"Okay," she said. The woman noticed the hesitant look on her face and nodded reassuringly. "I don't think you'll get any more bad dreams tonight. I'll be here, don't worry. And I'll keep the stars on. You know, I could really watch them for hours –"

Eleven yawned and laid down, retreating under the coat before the woman could continue. Eventually, she smiled, leaning back and putting her hands under her head as she stared up to the ceiling.

Yeah, maybe she should just keep watching them for a bit.

5. Chapter 4

Chapter 4: No aliens in Hawkins

Mrs. Wheeler made sure to be very careful as she cracked the door to her son's bedroom open. "Micheal?"

He looked up from his bed, barely lifting his head off the cushion. "Oh, hi mom."

"Hi honey. How are you feeling?"

She went to sit beside him on the bed. He'd always been a little pale, but this time he almost looked like a skeleton. It stung her to see him like this, but she wasn't quite sure what to do about it, either. After all, being confronted with the death of your boy's best friend wasn't particularly a common thing as far as she could tell. Not in hully-dully *Hawkins*, at least.

"I don't feel good, to be honest. I- uh, I don't think I can go to school today."

"Oh, that's fine, sweetie, I understand." She put a hand around one of his wrists, tracing small circles with her thumb. "I need to drop off Nance, then I'm gonna check in on Barb's parents. Why don't you grab a book or something and come with me? We can stop by the video store on the way back, pick out whatever you want." She winked. "Even R-rated."

"Uh, I think I just want to stay home today. Maybe I'll attend the assembly. I'm not sure yet, but I just need some time to... you know. I mean, if that's okay?"

"Well, are you sure you're gonna be all right here by yourself?"

Oh, no need to worry about that, mom. Just ask the girl and the alien in the basement he thought. Speaking of the devil. Just as he opened his mouth to assure her he was *definitely* a big boy and he would be *absolutely* fine, they were interrupted by a couple of short thumps, seeming to originate from the kitchen. Mrs. Wheeler frowned. "What's

that?"

"Uh, probably the pipes. Dad said they've been a little noisy lately."

"Did he?" She frowned. "I really can't remember him saying that –"

"Uh... yeah, why do you think? I mean, as long as he doesn't tell you, it's not like he *actually* has to get it done..."

"Oooh, I already see how it is." She smiled. "Just make sure you don't let him hear that, Micheal Wheeler."

"I won't, mom," he replied, a stupid grin on his face.

"Anyway, I'll just leave you alone then. But if you need anything, call dad at work. You know," she winked, "if he isn't 'busy' with anything."

"I will. Bye, mom."

"Goodbye, sweetie."

She gave him a peck on the forehead, then gave his hand a final squeeze before she walked out of the room. Mike almost had to strain himself trying not to immediately jump out of the bed as she left. Just as he heard her footsteps fading away in the hallway, another set appeared, and before he even got the chance to lift the bedspread the woman came strolling into his room, casually chewing on some biscuits.

"*What the hell?*" he whisper-shouted. "What are you doing here? She could have seen you! I told you I would get you guys!"

"Fwot fwy fwalt," the woman answered, cheeks swelling up. "I fwust fwanted fwome fweakfwast –"

"What?"

She swallowed. "Sorry 'bout that. I said: I just wanted some breakfast."

"For God's sake, I would have brought you something if you had just waited!"

"Language. And sorry, Mike, I really am. Won't do it next time. Say, I suddenly have an enormous cravin' for custard creams. You wouldn't happen to have any, do you?"

"No," he sneered, kneeling down to look for the walkie-talkie. "We have eggos, go get some of those if you're hungry."

"Eggos? What are those?"

He was ready to throw his hands up in frustration as he came up again. "Do you have to ask about *everything*? Just look for a yellow box. It's in the kitchen."

"Yellow? Oh, no, that's not goin' to work, I'm afraid. I gave that to Eleven."

"Good for y— wait, what?" He stared up at her. "The whole box?"

"Well, ya. What is she supposed to do with a half box? Half's not good."

"Yeah, but it isn't exactly..." He shook his head. "You know what, never mind. I'm going to call Lucas and Dustin."

"Sure. I'll be off for a bit then. Goin' wherever the universe needs me." The cheerful expression on her face suddenly transformed into a more thoughtful frown. "Right... that does remind me of somethin', but I can't really put my finger around it..."

And off she was, mumbling to herself as she left an eye-rolling Mike behind. He turned the walkie-talkie on and took the antenna out. "Lucas, do you copy?"

No reply. "Lucas, come on, I know you're there! This is urgent!"

Silence.

"I'm serious."

Just interference.

"I'm not gonna stop until you answer. Lucas. Lucas! Lucas, Lucas,

Lucas, Lucas, Lucas Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas, Lucas..."

The radio finally crackled as Lucas' muted voice came through: "Go away, Mike. I'm not in the mood, alright? Over and out."

"No, not out– Lucas? Lucas!"

Mike sighed. He looked frustrated when the woman came walking in again, a tad absently as she bit her lip. "Somethin' up?"

"He doesn't want to listen. Didn't you say you were going out a minute ago?"

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Ya, I did. It was a lovely stroll if you're wonderin'. Went for a nice walk around the house."

"Our house doesn't even go round."

"Really?" For a second, she pulled such a shocked face that he nearly forgot he was meant to go mental at Lucas' stubbornness. "Now *that's* a mystery right there, young fellow."

"Anyway, you better get out, because I'm about to go crazy at Lucas here –"

"Why would you? Here, I have a much easier solution."

Before he even blinked, she had snatched the walkie-talkie from his hands and proceeded to fiddle with the buttons. "Well, this would go a tad smoother if I had my sonic, but it'll just have to do. Just make sure you put somethin' in your ears, 'kay?"

He was a bit uncertain – not to mention freaking *scared* – about the weird woman's plans, but he put his fingers in his ears anyway. It turned out he couldn't be more grateful for her warning. After some more fiddling, the walkie-talkie emitted a shrill, screeching sound that would've been enough to blow his eardrums to shreds. Lucas was audibly less fortunate as the noise was followed by a strings of colorful language that made the woman frown in disgust as she turned the buttons again. "Jesus Christ Mike, *what the hell was that?*"

"Kolerian battle hymns," the woman replied. "Quite a lovely race, but

their music stations are dreadful. Anyhow, now that I got your attention, Lucas, you better make sure you get a shift on before I start playin' their thirty-three symphonies as well."

"Alright, alright! Just what do you want me for?"

"Mike got some news about your friend. You know, the lost one, not the askin' questions-one. So get here, and bring your friend with you. Not the lost one, the askin' q –"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Be there soon, over and out."

"There," the woman said, giving an approving nod as she threw the device back to Mike. He almost looked like he'd just seen water burn. "Thanks. Where did you get that idea?"

"Oh, I've put up with quite some tenacious people in the past. There was this lady – forget what her name was, but it might've been something with a D... Oh well. I'm just going to check the house one more time, in case I've managed to accidentally open a black hole or somethin'."

"Uh, sure. See you in a minute then,"

"Cheerio!" As the woman left, Mike could not help but allowing a slight giggle to slip past his lips. He just wished he could've seen Lucas' face.

Eleven showed up just a couple of minutes before the arrival of the boys.

"Oh, hey," Mike said as he greeted her. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at the walkie-talkie in his hands. El went to sit beside him, again preferring the silence over the possibility to answer. It was only now that he finally realized she was still wearing the woman's torn coat. He raised his eyebrows in surprise, but chose not to say anything about it.

"Look, El, I know I've already apologized to you yesterday, but I just... I just want to say sorry one more time. You were just trying to help and I shouldn't have come at you like that."

"You were... worried," Eleven said, trying to find the right words.

"I know. But that doesn't give me the right to shout at you or call you a liar and that stuff." He sighed. "So, you know, if you want to call me a mouth breather or something, go ahead."

Eleven looked up at him. There was something in his eyes that she vaguely understood, or maybe she just thought she did – she wasn't sure. Hesitantly, she asked: "Mike, are you scared?"

Mike frowned. He wasn't so taken aback by the question, but rather by how right it was. Would it indeed be fair to ask if all of this scared him? Was the lure of the novelty and excitement of it all stronger than the fear of the unknown and, more importantly, the possibility that it could be *dangerous*?

"Well, I'm not– I'm not sure. You know, it's a bit weird and all. Not that I want to say you're weird –"

"Weird is bad?"

He stared at her, yet again not quite sure what to say. "No. No, not at all. Sometimes weird just means, you know, different. That's not bad. The mouth breathers I told you about – Troy and James, they think we're sort of different, so they bully us for it. Especially Will..."

El noticed his face falling and reached out to gently touch his arm, not quite daring to take one of his hands in her own yet. "You'll find him."

"Yeah, I suppose. With your help... and the crazy woman's, right."

"Mad."

"Uhu. Do you really think she's from space?"

El didn't answer. At first he thought she couldn't comprehend the word (whatever place she'd come from, he very much doubted she had ever had the chance to look at the sky, let alone understand what was behind it), but then she finally nodded. "Yes. From the stars."

"Huh. Hey, are you absolutely sure you don't know her? Like, maybe

not from the bad place, but from somewhere else?"

It did occur to her to tell him about her doubts – the way just looking at the woman, the way she moved and talked, almost *reminded* her of something, but she couldn't put her finger about it because it seemed like another shadow from the darkness that made up her past. And yet it didn't feel like *just* another of the shadows. It was much more brighter than that, and the feeling was way more different as well. Almost pleasant.

"I don't know," she replied, honestly. She was actually rather proud of that answer – it practically embraced all of her mixed feelings and she didn't have to lie to him about it, either.

Mike frowned and opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, he heard a rapid knocking on the door. "That's the others. Here, can you get Will on the supercomm?"

Not really expecting a reply, he tossed her the walkie-talkie and sprinted down to let his friends in. Eleven just stared at the device for a little while, then started to turn the buttons.

"So there are cyborgs that kill humans by cutting them in pieces and re-engineer them into other cyborgs? That's mental!"

"It's really not, Dustin, and if you could just focus for a sec –"

"Oh. Yeah, right. Sorry."

"Guys, quiet, I thought I heard something." Mike said, interrupting the small quarrel between Dustin and the weird woman. They were sitting in a circle in front of Eleven's bedspread tent, all looking in intense concentration as she kept turning buttons and the supercomm emitted a low, static sound. After a while, Mike almost jumped. "There it was again!"

"What?" Lucas asked, sounding sarcastic.

"Well, we keep losing the signal, but you heard it, right?"

"Yeah, I heard a baby."

Mike frowned. "What?"

"Mike, you obviously tapped into a baby monitor. It's probably the Blackburns next door."

"Oh, that's *definitely* not a baby," the woman said.

"Oh yeah? And how are you so sure?"

"Well, I speak it."

"That's bull—"

"Language, young man. And in case you're wonderin', that's really not a baby whimperin'."

"Yo, you should listen to the alien." Dustin chimed in.

"Guys, please. That was really Will."

"Mike—"

"Lucas, you don't understand. He spoke last night. Actual words. He was singing that weird song he loves. Even El and the woman heard him!

"That settles it. If the woman heard him —"

"Come on, Dustin, you're only really saying that because you think she's an alien."

"Nothin' is wrong with my hearin', thank you very much," the woman said, "well, I used to suffer from acute deafness whenever someone else was talkin', but that was different. Anyway, that was your friend singin' last night."

"And if the weirdo heard him as well," Dustin added, "Well, I guess... are you sure you're on the right channel?"

"I don't think it's about that. I think, somehow, she's channeling him. Wasn't that what you said as well, ma'am?"

"Sort of, ya. She might've used some kind of telepathy —"

"Like Professor X?" Dustin asked. The woman frowned. "Who?"

"Never mind him," Mike quickly interrupted. "So, telepathy?"

"Basically. You'll have to imagine it like a bit of a circuit. Right now, all of our brains are emittin' brainwaves just by speakin' or talkin' – or singin', for that matter. It's essentially the rhythm of your consciousness. Wherever your friend is right now, he managed to emit brainwaves that Eleven managed to pick up, so she kind of tapped into his telepathic circuit."

"Wow," Dustin said.

"I still don't get it," Lucas replied.

"So that would mean he's close, right?" Mike asked.

"That's hard to say, honestly. It partially depends on the extent of Eleven's powers as well. You either have a close transmitter or a very strong receiver."

"Oh come on, you aren't actually believing this crap, are you?"

Dustin shrugged. "I don't know, I mean– do you remember when Will fell off his bike and broke his finger? He sounded a lot like that."

Lucas let his dumbfounded gaze go around the circle, as if the very fact that they were sitting here was unbelievable on itself. "Did you guys not see what I saw? They pulled Will's body out of the water. He's dead!"

"Well, maybe it's his ghost." Dustin's eyes widened. "Maybe he's haunting us!"

The woman shook her head. "No, he isn't."

"Why?"

"I would've known. I fought against them,"

Dustin's eyes seemed to widen even more, so Mike quickly interrupted: "He's not dead."

"So how do you know that?"

"I just do!"

"Then what was in that water?"

Mike fiercely drew breath to answer, but found that he could not come up with one – the fact that the body in the water had seemed an awfully lot like Will's was one you couldn't even deny with all the optimism in the universe. Dustin's face fell. Even Eleven looked like she just wanted to shrink and disappear under the woman's coat. For one second, he couldn't feel anything but a deep hate for his friend – for the fact that he was *right* and he would try to persuade them to give it all up, and maybe he would succeed.

"You can give up, if you want."

All turned to face the woman – and Mike was simply scared. Her face wasn't contorted or angry, but he saw an expression in her eyes that had his guts twisting just by the appearance of it. "There's nothin' withholding you, Lucas. If you feel encouraged to give up, you can just get up and leave. But one way or the other, he will know you let him down."

Lucas didn't even manage to come up with at least an attempt to reply – he just shrank at her hard words. Looking down in shame, he softly nodded.

"So Will's alive," Dustin said. "Have you tried talking to him?"

Mike shook his head. "It didn't work last night. Maybe we can try if Eleven manages to get him on the comm again, but so far it doesn't seem to be working. Unless you know something," he added, nodding to the woman. "Well, as I said, it's difficult," she said, gently reaching out to El so that she could give her the device, "But so far, the only problem seems to be that the device is strugglin' to pick up the signal again. I could've fixed it if I had my sonic, but my pockets are awfully empty. Meanin' that –"

"We just have to take her to a stronger radio," Dustin finished.

"Exactly. You're really the brightest one 'round here, aren't ya?"

He smiled so broadly that for a second, Mike was afraid the few teeth he had would fall out. "Wow, if you could just say that to Mr. Clarke _"

"That's it!" Mike piped up. "Mr. Clarke's Heathkit ham shack! That would be strong enough, wouldn't it?"

Finally daring to give some input again, Lucas spoke up: "The Heathkit's at school. There is no way we're gonna get the weirdo in there without anyone noticing. I mean look at her!"

Now, all eyes drifted to Eleven, who simply tried to stare at all of them as she strengthened her grip on the coat.

"We could use a disguise," Dustin said. "That shouldn't be too hard,"

"Give her some make-up, other clothes, take her to school," Lucas added.

"And get her to call Will on the Heathkit." Mike finished. "Yeah, could work!"

"Brilliant!" The woman smiled, patting both Dustin's and Lucas' heads. "I knew you could do it, little schemers. Tomorrow, you'll rule the world."

She stood up – surprisingly fast, Mike noticed – but then suddenly started to totter, legs shaking as she reached for her chest with a loud gasp. The boys quickly got up as well. "What's wrong?" Dustin asked.

"Well, I remember somethin' – I felt a tad feverish this mornin', but I couldn't quite determine the cause."

There was a sudden jerk of her body as she nearly fell backwards, causing all the boys to yelp in shock. "Is she having a stroke?" Lucas almost yelled.

"Don't worry – it's nothing major, I suspect. Quite fascinatin', really. It's like your whole body is rearranged and all of your little cells are wrigglin' and shakin' inside," the woman answered, letting out a frantic giggle.

"Uh, that sounds painful." Dustin said.

"Well, yeah, but I should be alright. I'll just– ow!"

This time, she couldn't keep herself from toppling over, and the boys speeded to steady her as she rocked up and down. "Okay, this might've been a tad worse than I thought. One of my hearts just collapsed. Terribly sorry, but I think I'm about to pass out, so if you lot could catch me in a minute –"

"Wait, did she say *one* of her hearts?" Lucas asked.

"When are you going to pass out?" Mike shouted. Just as it started to occur to him that it was a rather stupid question – like you could *really* know when you were going to pass out – the woman stuck a finger up her nose, and inhaled deeply. Strangely, Mike immediately realized what she was doing; she was trying to *smell* the time. Was that even near remotely possible?

"In two minutes nineteen seconds. No, wait." She took another deep sniff. "Forgot the two minutes, nineteen –"

At last, her legs started to wobble and her eyes rolled back as she mumbled: "Oh, this new nose is so reliable."

With some effort, the boys managed to catch her before she could hit the ground. They laboriously put her on the floor, all drawing a deep breath to overcome the shock as they got up again.

"Is she... is she dead?" Dustin asked, sounding distressed.

"No, I don't think so," Mike answered. "She's still breathing. Look, her chest is going up and down."

"This is a hell of a problem, though." Lucas said. "How are we supposed to bring her along to school now?"

"We can't. You don't know a way to drag a unconscious woman into a building full of people without anyone noticing, do you?"

"So what do we do with her?" Dustin asked again. "Leave her here?"

"Well, I'm not exactly comfortable with keeping her in my basement."

"You serious? You kept the weirdo in here, too. You're literally being racist right now."

"Oh, give me a break. Are you saying your mom isn't going to freak out when she finds a unknown woman in your basement?"

"But a bald girl wouldn't be a problem?"

"That's different. El can hide."

"We can hide the woman too. Just lay her on the couch, put a blanket over her, or hide her behind some boxes..."

"Dustin." Lucas grabbed his arm. "I have to agree with Mike here. The woman's a lot more unpredictable than the weirdo. Look, if we just bring her to the police –"

"We're not going to bring her to the cops!"

"Just let me finish, Jesus. If we bring her to the cops, maybe they can find out who she is, or how she can get home. It's just safer. If we keep her here, who knows where she'll run off to?"

Dustin appeared to be preparing himself for a strong-worded comeback, but he did see the sense in his friends' concerns. Even though the idea of handing an alien over to Hopper – who didn't exactly seem to take a liking towards any stuff that could be possibly regarded as "dumb fantasy play" – sounded ridiculous to him, it would be the most strategic thing to do. It was better to play safe – and he didn't need D&D to tell him that.

"Alright then. But how are you planning on transporting her, genius?"

"I might have an idea," Mike said. "We'll disguise El first, and we'll drop the woman off on our way to school."

"Yeah, but *how*?"

"You'll see. Now stop complaining and get to work."

And to work they went, hurrying up the stairs to Nancy's room to find old clothes as the woman laid on the basement floor, drifting in the darkness.

To say that Jim Hopper wasn't particularly amused by the sight of three boys and a girl hurrying up the walkway with a wheelbarrow in front of them was a mere understatement – he was pretty freaking pissed. He'd been intending to go back to the station and question Gary about all the mysterious shit surrounding the finding of the Byers boy, but now he stopped dead in his tracks as the kids came to a halt in front of him.

"Mr. Hopper!" the one pushing the wheelbarrow gasped. To his surprise, he recognized him as one of Will Byer's friends – Wheeler. Now mentioning it, they all seemed to belong to the group Joyce described to him, except the girl.

"Look, kids, I know you're very upset about Will, but I really don't have time for games right now."

"We're not playing any games, really. It's just that we have found something and –"

"And it's really heartwarming that you're trying to help, but I've got more important things to worry about now. So if you want to report something, just speak to Flo, and she'll –"

"Can you just *listen* for a second?" Dustin suddenly shouted. Hopper frowned and looked at him. They could already tell there was a strong answer forming on his lips – and he probably wasn't going to ask him what they had found.

"We've found a woman." the boy said, now more calmly. "Look."

Surprisingly, Hopper did as he said and suddenly noticed a couple of legs sticking out from under the cloth covering the wheelbarrow. The Wheeler boy pulled it off, revealing the legs to belong to the body of a blonde woman, dressed in some kind of ragged magician's suit.

"What the hell did you kids –"

"She's not dead," Wheeler quickly said. "Just unconscious. We found her tomorrow when we uh, wanted to meet up to talk about Will."

"And do your parents now about this?"

"No, they don't. They uh, they were out for work and groceries and... stuff."

"Right." Hopper took a few steps to have a closer look, but he made sure to keep his distance. From experience, he knew drunks naturally weren't very harmful – that was, until they suddenly jumped up and knocked you out to have a better look at your wallet and pocket contents.

"You are aware that you guys could very well just have picked up a random drunk, right?"

He wondered what her age was. She wasn't young, but she wasn't old either – somewhere in her thirties, maybe. Meaning that he was now stuck with a dead boy, a hysterical mother *and* a woman in a midlife crisis.

"We don't think she's drunk,"

"And why's that?"

"Well, she doesn't smell like she is."

Hopper had another look at the woman. He wasn't very eager to lean over and take a sniff, but he didn't think he had to either – even at this close distance, he didn't recognize the characteristic smell of alcohol. He came up again and let out a deep sigh. "Alright then. I'll take her in, see what I can do. But I don't want you to walk around on the streets without your parents knowing, okay? Not until we know what happened to Will. So either go home, or go to school."

"We will. We're going to the assembly at school now."

"And be careful with her," Dustin said. "She's an alien."

"She's a *what*?"

"Uh, we gotta go now, or we'll be late," Mike quickly interrupted. "If you need anything, uh, information –"

"I'll know where to find you. Now get on your way."

"Okay. Bye, sir."

Hopper looked on as the kids got on their bikes and took off in the direction of the Hawkins Middle School. As he looked back at the woman, he sighed deeply and went to lift the woman from the wheelbarrow. She felt a little fragile in his hands, but very warm too – almost like she was on fire. Letting out a frustrated grunt, he turned around, and started to carry her up the stairs.

He couldn't even fathom what Calvin and Phil were going to say.

6. Chapter 5

Chapter 5: The Stranger

"You boys hear me all right in there?"

"Loud and clear, Shepard."

Brenner nodded. "Good luck in there, son."

As the man made his way into the strings of black, gooey matter in the wall, the doctor could not help but feel a little anxious as well – which, to be honest, was completely justified given the nature of the whole situation. The project had seen some significant hindrances, of course: there was the whole problem with the dead kid and Eleven's disappearance, but he was almost certain those issues would solve themselves in the end. No, the nervousness that was currently crawling up his spine was rooted in some deeper concern, perhaps a clear understanding of the borders that they were about to cross. He knew the portal and what it represented. Uncovering the rest of its mysteries was probably just a minor step into the magnificent, unexplored realms that were lying behind it. And yet, he was slightly worried about the consequences as well. After all, he hadn't forgotten what had happened all those years ago... the incident, the... what was the word? *Interference*. That was right. It didn't matter. Back then, it had just been a matter of mere interference, and they were pretty much on their way to make significant progress again.

The radio crackled as it came to life: "You folks listening? I'm in."

"Good work," Brenner said. "I want you to describe the environment to me, Shepard."

"Well... it's hard to make out anything else but black shit if you ask me, doctor. There's a lot of vines, couple of broken lights... hold on."

"What is it?"

The radio went silent for a bit. Brenner felt his blood starting to pump faster as he repeated, very carefully: "Shepard, what did you

see?"

He sighed in relief as Shepard spoke up again: "Thought I saw something. Might've been nothing."

"Go have a look, then. There's only one way to be sure."

"Right. May go dead for a bit, because there's a lot of interference and the terrain isn't exactly helping either –"

They heard him cursing under his breath as he began his journey, the signal occasionally losing its strength as time progressed. Brenner stared into the darkness of the portal. It was nothing, of course, but he still had this eerie premonition... and yet it didn't make sense. Or did it?

"Well, shit." was the sole announcement from the radio.

Brenner's voice was slightly trembling as he asked: "What do you see?"

"It's a box, sir. A dark blue box. It seems to have some signs, but I can't quite make them out as the whole thing is a bit – fuck!"

The scientist's mind went nearly blank as Shepard suddenly screamed for his life and the men at the winch speeded to retract the line from the portal. He considered asking if he was absolutely sure, if he had *really* seen a box with unreadable signs, but realized it would be pointless. The man was dead. The only physical evidence they needed for that fact was the loose, red stained end of the line as it came rolling back from the portal. His mind wasn't with the men that looked at each other, wondering which damned, incredible force could have taken the poor man's life.

The box.

He'd found a box.

Speaking about ghosts of the past.

Well, at least Cal and Phil didn't burst out in laughter when he

carried the woman in – but to say they looked as if it were a normal thing was a bit of a stretch as well.

"I know what you're thinking, and no, I don't care. Now shut up and help me clear the couch."

"Christ, Chief, you sure know how to keep things interesting," Cal said. "Where the hell did you find this lady?"

"Some kids brought her in. Forgot to ask where they found her."

"Uh, is she drunk?"

"What do you think, Cal?" Hopper sneered. "Does she *smell* like she's drunk?"

"No, but –"

"Then shut up and get to work. Phil, take her legs."

Cal cleared the couch as Phil took the woman's legs in his hands. Immediately, his eyes widened and he muttered: "Jesus, she's burning!"

"I know. Might be a fever. Just lay her gently down – there."

They draped her over the couch, one head resting on one of the arms, legs hanging over the other. After stepping back, Hopper took another chance to have a good look at the woman's features. Her eyes were closed, quite peacefully, but her forehead showed signs of a contorted frown – almost as if she was having a bad dream. He wondered if she was in pain. Her body was almost feverishly warm for sure, but aside from the temperature, there was no indication that she suffered from any kind of illness.

"Take her pulse. I'll go and check with Flo if there are any other missing persons reported."

He left Phil to check her condition and walked over to the front desk, where the old receptionist seemed to be looking into a couple of papers. "Flo, do we have –"

"I already told you, Jim, if the coffee machine isn't working, you're supposed to check the filter. Nine out of ten times you fellas don't seem to even bother maintaining anything around here."

"What?" He frowned. "No, that's not what I meant. I wanted to ask if there are any other persons reported missing."

"Apart from the Byers kid? Not that I know of. Sorry about that, by the way."

"Thank you. But are you sure? Not even from Jackson? Kerley County?"

"Well, I could have another look if you want."

"Please." He turned and went back to the office where the news unfortunately didn't seem to be any better; he was greeted by Phil's pale face behind his fogged glasses. "I– I think she's dead, Chief. No pulse."

"You sure? Have you checked twice?" He walked over to the couch and took the woman's left wrist in his hands. As he pressed his fingers on the little collection of blue veins under the soft skin, he could feel a steady pumping which was – although distant – definitely there.

"Bullshit. She still has a pulse."

"Not when I checked it. Take her right arm."

He did as he was told and found, to his big surprise, that his deputy was indeed right; the pumping he'd felt in her other wrist seemed to be absent here. He switched between both, felt her left wrist again, then her right one, until he felt like his eyebrows were ready to fall off his face. "She has *two* pulses?"

"Maybe we ain't doing it right," Phil said. "Did you check her temperature, Chief? She feels like she's burning up from the inside,"

"Yeah, I felt it. She doesn't seem to have a fever though. Maybe a bit of rest will do some wonders." He looked up. "Weren't you fellas supposed to go to the school? Look into the case of that missing teenager?"

"C'mon, she's not *missing*." Cal commented. "You know what those teens are like, Chief. A whole lotta fuzz about nothing. She'll probably be hanging out at her boyfriend's place or something."

"Well, that sure doesn't sound like anything miss Holland's told me. And if you don't mind, I have just about enough of people going missing in this place. Get off your asses, and get to that school."

"Right, 'right," Cal sighed. "No need to be snappy. You sure you don't need any help with that lady?"

"Out."

Well, that settled it. The two deputies casted each other a slight frown and let out a collective grunt as they turned around and walked out of the small, cluttered office. They passed Flo in the doorway, apologizing as they attempted to squeezed through. Flo muttered something about "having some damn manners" and walked up to Hopper. "No other reports, Chief. If she's got some kind of identification on her, I guess I could call some folks and find out where she's from –"

"No, she doesn't seem to have anything on her. I'll ask her once she wakes up. Could you call a doctor?"

"Sure. Oh, and by the way, Gary's waiting for you as well."

Hopper looked up. In all the suddenness of the moment, he'd nearly forgotten to question the coroner about the Byers kid. "Oh, yeah, thanks. You can send him in."

"Will do."

As Flo left the office, Hopper could not help but keep staring at the woman's motionless body. This job sure was getting a lot more interesting.

"Got a visitor, Chief?" Gary asked, casting an interested glance at the woman as he entered the office.

"It's nothing. Please, have a seat, Gary."

The old coroner did was he was asked and let out a gentle sigh as he patted his knees. He seemed to be in good shape. At least one thing that wasn't either batshit crazy or unnervingly unusual, Hopper thought as he sat down.

"So, if you don't mind, I'd like you to tell me about these troopers that brought in Will."

"Troopers?" Gary raised his eyebrows. "Well, uh, it was about six of 'em, I'd say."

"All States?"

"Yes sir. Never seen that many troopers come with a body before."

Hopper frowned. The coroner was right; it all just didn't seem to make any sense. Why such a heavy escort? After all, it was not like the kid had any significant relevance he was aware of; unless there was some kind of secret importance to him that he didn't know about... But what the hell could be so important about a dead kid?

Unless he ain't dead, that is.

"They told you that they were gonna take care of the autopsy, huh?"

Gary nodded. "Yeah. Claimed jurisdiction. Kicked me out. The whole official government-bullshit. Well, it all seemed a bit over the top to me, considering..."

"Considering what?"

He shrugged. "Considering this was Will Byers and not John F. Kennedy. I would've understood it if he had been the son of a local big shot, but that ain't quite true, is it? His mother's separated, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hm. Poor lady. The world can be unforgiving sometimes, if you know what I'm saying."

"Amen." Hopper rubbed his eyes.

"Say, Chief, you don't reckon there's something going on, do you?"

"Well, I'm not– I'm not sure. That's what I'm looking into. Anyway, thanks for stopping by, Gary. I won't take up anymore of your time."

"Sure thing." The old coroner got up and stretched his back. As he turned around, he could not help but have another look at the rather... *remarkably* clothed woman. "Who's the lady, by the way?"

"Not a clue. Some tippler we're trying to get identification from. You don't happen to recognize the face, do you?"

Gary rubbed his chin as he studied her features. For a second, Hopper had a slight bit of hope that he would indeed recognize the woman, but the coroner just shook his head. "I wouldn't have a clue. Sorry, Chief."

"That's alright. Take care."

"Good day sir."

As he waddled out of the room, the police chief was yet again left alone with the nearly lifeless woman on the couch. He stared at her, although he didn't register any of her looks this time. His mind had drifted off to elsewhere, to the boy they had found in the water, Joyce's screams as she struggled to accept the fact that her little boy was gone. Well, that was what he thought. Maybe he'd been a little too quick in his dismissal of her claims. Sure, it could all be a big imagination fed by his own horrific memories resurfacing from the depths of his mind, but there was something... *strange* about the boy that just didn't want to let him go. And although his deputies and possibly anyone else with a right state of mind would surely label him as 'crazy' if he would dare to come out with this, he was anxiously sure it wasn't just a gut feeling.

And that, my friends, was a certainty.

He sat down again and started rubbing his temples. Maybe trying to recollect his thoughts would help a bit. After that, he could go and try to find out more about these remarkably 'dedicated' troopers.

Until Flo proposed it, it didn't occur to him that a bit of medication could perhaps do something about the infernal temperature. He was about to get up and leave when she came strolling in and placed a strip of Tylenol on his desk. "There. Phil told me she had some kind of fever. Maybe this'll help a bit."

"Uh, yeah, maybe," Hopper said, shaking his head to alleviate the dizziness. "Flo, you don't happen to know how to feed drugs to an unconscious person, do you?"

That was a question she didn't even bother to answer. She just gave him a venomous glance, shook her head and went back to the reception. He considered to throw her a comment or two, something about that he wasn't a fucking doctor and his only relevant experience had been getting pills *out* of junkies instead of *in*, but decided not to. After all, she was part of the rare amount of people who still seemed to be using their heads around here. Popping a pill out of the strip, he sighed and took her chin in one of his calloused palms. When he forced some space between her lips, it almost seemed like some kind of gold dust was flowing out, but he ignored it and placed the pill on her tongue. Well, triggering her swallow reflex shouldn't be too hard. If you thought about it, it was just the opposite of getting a kid to spit out the toy he was choking on. Her grabbed her chin and forced her mouth shut, just enough to hear a slight clicking sound in the depth of her throat. That should do it. Relieved and content, he sat back, and prepared to go out and look for the trooper...

...which he probably would have done if the effect wasn't so damn immediate. The woman started to cough and convulse, pressing her hands on her stomach as she rolled on her side. It took her just a couple of antagonizing seconds before she managed to cough up the pill. The white capsule landed on the desk, surprisingly intact.

"Jesus Christ!" Hopper shouted as he ran back to the cough and helped her to sit up. She was still clutching at her throat, but the convulsing had stopped and her breathing seemed to be normal.

"Are you okay? Lady, can you hear me?"

"Tiny contractions... still bubblin' inside... are you my mummy?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, bit of a callback." She turned to look at him. Now that she was no longer quiet, Hopper found himself surprised at how energetic was. "Oh, hello there. What exactly did you do to me?"

He nearly struggled to get any coherent words out of his mouth as he answered: "Uh, well, I just gave you some aspirin. Figured it might relieve the fever a bit."

"Aspirin?" Her face wrinkled in disgust. "Oh dear, never do that again, please. You could've ended up killin' me. Glad my heart kicked in again, just in time."

Now he was simply lost for words as she stood up and started to walk around the office, rambling on about "mighty fine new arteries!" and other bullshit he couldn't make out. Well, this was certainly turning out to be an interesting morning. He hadn't expect a drunk, but a British drunk who also appeared to be a lunatic was enough to make him question his sanity.

"Alright, that should do it. That nap did me a whole lot of good, much appreciated. I'll be off th – "

"Hold on a minute," Hopper finally said as he got up. He took a few steps towards the door, in case the woman would attempt to make a run for it – she certainly seemed like someone who wouldn't have any trouble doing a full marathon. "There's a couple of questions for you to answer first, lady."

"Really? Excitin'. Really excitin'. What's on your mind, chap?"

"Well, you can start off by telling me your name."

"Oh, not again." The woman let out a deep sigh as her shoulders fell. "Look, I'm gettin' there, but it still isn't exactly clear yet."

"What, you mean you've forgotten it?"

"Ya. I think. Honestly, I'll remember it soon, it's precisely on the tip of my... my..."

She placed a finger on her tongue and her eyes widened at the touch of it. "Wow, what is *that*?"

"You got to be kidding me."

"No, really, what is it? It feels all mushy and... and soft? Almost like a... a..."

"A tongue?" Hopper said, sounding unimpressed. The woman smiled. "Tongue! Smart boy, biology. Now, I'd love to stay and chat, but there's somethin' –"

"Oh no, you're going nowhere," the police chief said as he grabbed hold of her. She was too surprised to do anything, so he had no trouble pushing her back and sitting her down on the couch. He pulled his own chair along as well and sat down in front of her, letting out a grunt as she curiously studied his movements.

"Now then, have you finally calmed down?"

She just nodded.

"Okay. That's good. Next question: are you alright? Do you need a doctor?" He made sure to draw out the words slowly and carefully. It could be too slow to her liking, but he didn't care. He had her attention now and he'd make sure he wasn't going to lose it.

"No but I would very much like to –"

"Quiet. Just to be sure, I'm gonna have one come over anyway. Now, again, I'm gonna need a name, so I'd like you to do your best and try to remember it."

He waited patiently as the woman's face seemed to go through a couple of phases: first confused, then a bit relieved, only to transform in a full, absent frown again. At last, she just shrugged. "Jane Smith."

"Are you serious?"

"You did ask for a name, didn't you? I can come up with a thousand other ones if you –"

"No, no, never mind. Just... just, don't mention it." He shook his head. Trying to make some sense of the woman's words was as near possible as lifting an elephant with your bare hands.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what's happened to you, but I just want to make sure you're okay. I'm not sure if you're aware of what's been happening in this town lately, but it's far from healthy. You turning up here completely confused and disheveled isn't particularly helping with that."

"I understand."

"Well, I doubt –"

"Look, big lad – what's your name? Grumpy bear?"

"Jim Hopper," he scoffed. "*Police Chief* Jim Hopper, in case you're wondering."

"Right then. Jim, I'm terribly sorry if this all upsets you. I really am. This is all probably more scary to me than it is to you, if that gives you some relief. But I want to *assure* you that our priorities aren't that different."

"And what makes you so sure of that?"

"Your face does."

"Sure." He was trying to keep his cool, but the woman's sudden shift from laughable wackiness to almost *menacing* sobriety made him feel uneasy, to say the least. Right now, he noticed, she wasn't even making the slightest attempt at a joke.

"I know the expression of a worried man. Seen far too many mirrors in my life, unfortunately. There's somethin' deeply botherin' you and I wouldn't be surprised if it's the same thing I'm concerned about."

He wanted to believe she was just telling bullshit right now. He really wanted to. But it didn't make sense. Why did she know he was pondering about something? Why was she suddenly so calm and composed after basically being all over the place? And for the love of God, why had the aspirin nearly killed her?

"I appreciate your concern, but I hope you can agree with me when I say it's hard to trust someone we just found on the streets."

"Of course. But I don't need your trust. Not yet, at least. I just need a chance to prove myself. Everything else can come after that."

Hopper sighed. He cradled his head in one of his hands as he considered it all again, trying to understand this strange person and possibility determining whether he could trust her or not.

"Look," the woman said, leaning forward. "In under five minutes, I've made you question your prejudices about me, got you to tell me your name, and uncovered what keeps you awake at night. That's not bad for a lunatic, is it?"

"I didn't say you were –"

"No, but you were thinkin' it. I wouldn't blame you, honestly. Right now I'm more of a stranger to myself than I am to you."

"You don't make sense."

"Ya, I'm used to that." The woman offered him a soft grin. "But I am serious. Tryin' to. I want to help."

He frowned. "I wouldn't even know how you could be of any use, considering you can't even remember your own name and you don't seem to have anything on you –"

"Eh, yeah... minor inconvenience. Wouldn't be a problem if I had my TARDIS or at least my sonic, but –"

"Your what?"

"Oh, uh, never mind." she said, rather hastily. "But, err, I'm not on my own. Was not, actually."

"You mean you were with the boys that brought you in? Because they told me they found you somewhere and brought you right here."

"Well, they're not lyin'. Maybe just stretched the last part a bit. Just, uh, give me a slight hint of a direction and I'll be off. I won't bother

you anymore. Not until I need to, that is."

He let the woman's words sink in as he considered his options. Sure, there was a risk of sending a crazy woman out to the streets, but it wasn't like this town wasn't full of them already. Besides, he still got that weird itch about her. She seemed impressively sincere.

"Alright then," he finally sighed. "You're lucky I got too much on my mind right now, so I suppose I could let you go. But not right now. You seem to be okay from the outside, but just to be sure, I'm gonna have you checked by a doctor. That okay with you?"

"I could really use a doctor, now you've brought it up... just wish it was a bit more clearer why."

"Right," he said, ignoring the reply. "You just stay here. I'm gonna check with Flo to see if they've arrived yet. Don't move and don't touch anything, alright?"

She didn't answer. He didn't bother to wait and went to the reception to speak with Flo. Flo asked what the hell he needed this time. He answered that he just wanted to know when the doctor would arrive, and Flo told him she didn't have the slightest clue: depended on whether Dave would be good enough to hurry up and get off his lazy ass.

When he returned to the office, though, there was a rather unwelcome surprise waiting for him: the couch was empty. It took him just a few seconds to notice the open window. He speeded towards it and leaned out as he shouted: "Hey! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

The woman, now running in the middle of the street, turned around: "Wherever they need me! Pleasure to meet you, Jim, you're a nice lad! And if you happen to find a blue box lyin' around, uh... just don't touch it, okay?"

She was already sprinting again before he had the chance to answer. Shaking his head, he sighed and slammed the window shut.

It sure was an interesting morning.

7. Chapter 6

[A/N: Took me a while, apologies. I'm busy with personal writing projects as well. Anywho, thanks for the *brilliant* comments and happy Doctor Who day!]

Chapter 6: The Box

The woman speeded through the streets of Hawkins, leaving many people looking at her with somewhat curious expressions as she raced past them. Her legs were burning and her two hearts, now slightly recovered from their rearrangement, were pumping with renewed fervor. She felt healthy, almost recharged. Her mind was still a bit of a mess and she struggled to find any coherency in her memories, so she just decided to focus on the important matters at hand. There was a boy to find and now mentioning it, a box as well. Oh, of course she remembered that; no matter the strength or the size of the regeneration, she would never forget the very object that was most important to her. She wondered where it could have ended up. It sure seemed a bit shaken up after her recent transformation and it was not at all unlikely that the poor thing had just teleported itself to the other side of the universe, so she guessed there was nothing left to do but hope... but the old lady wouldn't just leave her, right?

Shaking the thought out of her head, she made a sharp turn and ran up the sidewalk. First things first. The TARDIS could come later; there was someone who needed her help right now, and as far as she was concerned, this was the only thing that mattered – the very thing that was the only thread in her still-rearranging existence. The only way that could possibly remind her of who she was.

And then, of course, there was that girl, but –

"Hey, watch out!"

The woman failed to stop herself in time and she wildly flailed her arms as she ran into the yelping figure on the walkway. There was a bit of a crashing sound, shocked gasps from bystanders, and some cursing. The woman looked up, shaking her head. She was rather

surprised to find that the colorful language came from another woman – a brunette, who looked a bit disheveled with her pale face and smudgy clothes. Well, it was probably a bit unfair to judge – after all, *she* was the one with the clothes that looked like they could've been from the worst secondhand shop in the universe.

"A thousand apologies," the woman said, jumping up with remarkably much energy as she extended a hand. She helped the brunette up, who muttered something about 'being sorry' and 'not being with my mind where I should be'.

"No, no, it's my fault, honestly," the woman said. "Was havin' way too much fun with my new legs. Look, I got two of them!"

She proceeded to do a kind of small tap dance, feet clicking on the concrete tiles. The brunette now simply looked as if she'd just encountered a woman who happened to have fallen off a psychiatric transport.

"Never gets old," the woman smiled when she finished. "I love legs. Wiggly wobbly legs. Oh, hang on – I'm sorry." She bent down to pick up the other woman's bag.

"You don't have to apologize, really," the brunette said, suddenly looking a bit lost. "I'm just... just a little confused."

"Don't like confused. Confused's no good," The woman offered her her bag. "What's your name?"

"Joyce."

"Joyce. I like that name. You should keep it. Mind tellin' me what you're confused about, Joyce?"

"Well..." Joyce suddenly looked around her as if she was suspicious of something. "I don't know if this is a joke or something, but..."

"Course not. Why would I be jokin'?"

"Uh. Well – I thought everyone already knew."

"Knew what?"

She sighed. "Look, I'm – I'm Joyce Byers."

The woman simply stared at her, with an expression Joyce couldn't recognize. Just as she thought she would gasp and it would finally grasp her who exactly she was talking with, she shook her head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Have I ran into you before? Could've been my previous face, or the one before that, because they were *incredible* at runnin' into people." She frowned. "No, forget that, they all were."

"You mean... you don't know?"

"No. Yes. I 'spose. You aren't bein' particularly helpful, Joyce."

"Sorry. I mean... I guess you aren't from around here." She swallowed. "Have you... have you heard about the missing boy?"

"I have."

"Pleasure to meet you then. I'm his mother."

The woman raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Ooooooh, are you? That explains a lot. Well not too much, considerin' he's lost and you aren't."

"Yes, you're right." Joyce's face cracked open in a weak smile that the woman actually found kind of unsettling. "He's not dead. They think he is. They want to bury him. But I know for a fact that whatever they found out there is *not* my *son*. He's still lost, and I'd be damned if I won't find him."

"Uh, ya, that's a good spirit. It all starts with good spirits. Bless you." The woman carefully patted her shoulder. "Speakin' about bein' lost Joyce, you wouldn't happen to know an assembly place for tiny humans, do you?"

"A *what*?"

The woman threw her hands up in a helpless gesture. "Come on, you know, Joyce! Same species, just a lot shorter than you... and a lot less wiser, for that matter. I'm just lookin' for the right name..."

"Kids?"

"Kids! That's right! Love kids, kids are brilliant!" She smiled and started jumping up and down with excitement. "I'm supposed to meet a bunch, but I have no clue where they've ran off to. Can't remember properly, but I recall somethin' about a particular word... something like 'stool'."

"School?"

"Oh my days, Joyce, you're a genius." Before she could do anything about it, the woman leaned forward and gave Joyce a quick hug. She found herself unable to respond... although she had to admit it was kind of amusing.

"Now then. Schools. Any schools around here?"

"Well, yeah, you have Hawkins Middle and Hawkins High – but I suppose you're looking for Middle..."

"Probably. Could you point me in the right direction?"

"Uhm..." Joyce turned and looked around. Most of the bystanders had already moved on, but there were still some funny faces across the street – and this time they weren't even because of her, she supposed. The woman waited behind her, impatiently rocking back and forth.

"That way," she said, pointing to the far end of the street on their left. "Just take this street, turn right on the corner of Main Street and Finberry, and it should be at the end on your left."

"Thank you, Joyce. Joyce. Still like that name." The woman giggled. "I'll be off then."

"Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I 'spose. Shouldn't be wasting time. Bye then!"

Joyce wanted to answer, but found that the woman had already ran away before she could even have opened her mouth. Still not quite sure what to think of it all, she started to slowly turn to go back to home, but she nearly screamed as she felt an urgent tapping on her shoulder.

"Sorry. Forget to tell you somethin'. You should keep lookin', Joyce. Even when it seems highly unlikely, you'll never know what you find if you keep lookin'."

She seemed surprised. "Uh, thanks. What are –"

But the woman was off again, racing across the crossover and the sidewalk, coat fluttering behind her as she surprised every random passer-by she happened to speed past. Joyce put her hands to her mouth, and shouted: "Hey, you didn't even tell me your name!"

The woman made a slight turn, now jogging backwards. "Don't need one! Goodbye, Joyce, I'm going to *school*!"

"Holy shit, did you see what *she did*?" Dustin yelled, struggling to keep his voice under control as they ran through the hallway.

"I was standing next to you, idiot, I'm not blind!" Lucas sneered. "Shut up and keep running! They might be after us!"

Neither of them dared to have a peek over their shoulder as they speeded through the abandoned corridors. Mike made sure to be just behind Eleven, in case she would either trip or freak out about what had just happened, or both. No, that wasn't right. *He* would probably freak out. What just happened had both scared and amazed him – and although it was *surely* satisfying to see Troy piss himself, the fact that El could do such a thing was pretty damn unsettling on its own.

But she had done it to protect him. How could he be anything than grateful for that?

"In here – quick!" Lucas urged, leading them into another hallway. They came to a halt behind a wall, each one panting slightly as they finally allowed themselves to catch their breath. Dustin peeked around the corner to scout for any possible pursuers. "I don't think anyone has seen us."

"Of course not," Lucas panted. "They'll probably be still laughing their asses off about that airhead wetting his pants."

"That was *mental* though," Dustin commented, turning to the group

again. "I mean, did you see the look on his face?"

"Yeah. You know, that was actually legitimately cool."

"It was." Mike turned to Eleven, who had just been standing there staring intently at him. "Thanks for standing up for me, El."

El simply nodded, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road," Lucas interrupted. "The AV room is right over there."

"Don't you think Mr. Clarke will come after us, find out what all the fuzz was about?"

"Nah. Look, even if he saw it happen, there's no way he could link it to us – or Eleven. Let's just get her to the Heathkit before anyone starts asking stupid questions."

"Sure. Let's go."

They turned around and hurried to the AV room, now granting themselves the comfort of casting a glance back every now and then. The corridor was still empty, but they swore they could hear some excited voices coming from the distance.

"Shit – hurry up!" Dustin yelled. They started to run again, not caring about any eventual teachers they could run into. The door of the AV room was now just a couple of feet away. Just a little... Mike already rummaged in his pocket to dig up the key. They ran and ran, faster and faster...

...until suddenly, a figure appeared and they all screamed their lungs out. The figure let out a surprised yelp as well, although hers was much shorter – she was simply left staring at the kids with a flabbergasted look on her face.

It was the woman.

"Jesus Christ, you shared the shit out of us!" Lucas gasped.

"I thought I was getting a damn heart attack for a –"

"Oi, language!" the woman said, feigning anger as she finally managed to silence the boys. It was almost funny how quick she reasserted control. "Honestly, boys, you should do somethin' about the vocabulary. It's nerve-rackin'."

Lucas gaped at her. "How did you get here? We brought you to the police station like, just a couple of hours ago."

"Dude, have you forgotten about the *alien*-thing?"

"Dustin, I swear to God –"

"I was at the police station, yes." the woman quickly interrupted. "Key word *was*. Met a kind fellow, had a nice nap, shook up my whole artery system for a bit. Did me quite some good."

"Did you have a whole physical transformation, like – like the Thing?" Dustin asked.

"What thing?"

"You know, the Thing from *The Thing*. That shapeshifting alien that can absorb you and imitate your form?"

"Oh dear, no." The woman almost frowned in disgust. "Regeneration doesn't work that way, boy. And quite frankly, there's no race called 'things'."

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. No one wants to be called a 'thing'. Imagine bein' called a 'thing'. Haah!" The woman giggled like a kind of amused child. Her smile didn't last long, however, as she noticed the boys found themselves unable to respond, or just not able to look her in the eye at all. Even Dustin went silent after their small fit.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Your faces are actin' weird. It's so sad,"

Dustin stared at his feet. "Uh..."

"Look," Mike sighed, "we're sorry for leaving you behind at the police station. We weren't sure if you would wake up again,"

"Honestly, we thought you'd be slowing us down if we brought you along," Lucas added.

The boys all looked down in shame, not quite sure (and more afraid of) how the woman was going to respond. Eleven remained mainly on the background, just taking it all in with curious eyes. It was true. They had practically left her behind, and she had every right to be pissed off about it. They wouldn't expect anything less than a well-deserved scolding.

...So the wheezing sound came as a bit of a surprise, although they didn't realize what it was until they looked up. The woman was smiling and doing that childish giggle again. "Oh, silly, boys, you don't have to apologize. Do you really think I wouldn't have done the same if I had a strange lady collapsin' in my basement? Well, no, I would've done somethin' totally different, but that's not the point."

"You mean you aren't upset with us?"

"Oh, dear days, no, of course not." The woman kneeled slightly down, smiling to reassure them. "You did the only thing you believed to be right. I can't ask anything more of you. Now, how about we go and find your friend?"

"Sure, ma'am."

"Brilliant! Now, stuck at the door, I see, but that shouldn't be much of a problem. I have just the right thingy for that, and it's –"

She rummaged around in her pocket, frowned, rummaged again, took the stuffing out to search through it, only to find nothing and cry out in frustration: "Argh, empty pockets! I *hate* empty pockets! Just when I need that infernal sonic..."

"Uh, maybe let me...?" Mike held up the keys. The woman stared at them like they were some kind of magical wand. "Oh. Ya. Right. Keys. That could work."

She stepped aside to give Mike some room to unlock the door. While they waited, Dustin went and stood next to her, looking as impressed as ever. "You know, *I* proposed we should keep and hide you in the

basement."

"It's not a big deal, Dustin. Leave it."

"Okay. Just wanted you to know."

"I figured."

"Yeah." He fidgeted for a bit, then tugged at her coat. "Hey, want to know what the weirdo did?"

"Weirdo what?"

"Sorry, Eleven. Look, there were these two birdbrains that said shitty things about Will, so Mike went to confront them – and damn, I thought they were going to punch him in the face! But El stopped them and made one of them piss himself. Right there, it was leaking all over the floor!"

"Did she now?" The woman looked at Eleven, who seemed to cower a little.

"I know, it's crazy, right? It was damn epic!"

"I can imagine." The woman nodded reassuringly. "It's good to be brave and stand up to bullies. You did the right thing, Eleven."

And for sure, what else could the little girl do but softly smile at that warm compliment?

After Mike had unlocked the door, they hurried in and immediately closed it behind them. While the kids gathered around the table in the middle of the room, the woman walked around, eyeing every single bit of technology with childlike amazement. "Now *this* is already startin' to feel more familiar. 80's technology. Phones for giants and as practical as an upside-down stairway, but the aesthetic's phenomenal. I should consider a desktop theme..."

"Fire it up!" Dustin cheered.

"Be patient, man. You don't want this thing blown up, do you?"

"Guys, quiet. And make some room for El." Mike turned to the girl, gently gesturing her to get closer. El seemed encouraged by the renewed presence of the woman, although she was still very uncertain and careful in her movements.

"Right then," the woman said, joining them at the table. "I suppose it works the same as with your supercomm, so it shouldn't be too hard. Eleven, are you ready?"

El, now seated on the chair in front of the massive device, looked up at her with a slight hint of fear in her eyes. She extended a hand, the woman looking down at it, then back at her. "Oh, you want me to...?"

El nodded. The woman blinked, then swallowed as she took the girl's palm in her own. "Alright then. I got you. Nothing to be scared of,"

She found that it wasn't just comforting to the girl; somehow, it was quite reassuring to her as well. It was almost as if the simple touch of skin was the embodiment of something greater, a deeper connection that felt familiar to her in a way she wasn't particularly sure of. For sure, it could just be another impulse; after all, *deja vu* weren't exactly uncommon if you had already lived through thirteen lives, but she wondered whether there wasn't more to this than a vague sense of recognition. It'd be a gamble, of course. A special girl trying to get a grasp of who she was, trying to find some certainty in a new world full of scary and interesting things, far away from a home she couldn't possibly regard as such?

Isn't it ironic, mad woman? All you need is someone telling you you're looking into a mirror... and yet you haven't the slightest clue who you actually are.

"Off you go then."

She gave her fingers a little squeeze before the girl turned to the device and closed her eyes to concentrate. The boys stared intently over her shoulder, none of them feeling the need – or courage – to say something useful. They all listened to the silence, the slight interference radiating from the Heathkit, ready for it to be interrupted by something far more unsettling. Now they all had their doubts. For sure. But friends didn't leave each other behind, and even

in the darkest of moments, this was a promise that none of them was willing to break.

At first, there was darkness. It was not until the vision in front of her eyes was starting to morph that the woman realized she wasn't looking at the room anymore. Initially she thought the regeneration-dizziness was kicking in again, but the images were unusually clear. And they weren't even her own. Then how could it be she was able to see them? *Come on, mad woman, you're missing something. Somehow you must've tapped into...*

Oh, that was right! El was channeling some of her psychic powers through her own telepathic senses. Though she probably wasn't aware of it, because the presence of the woman was nowhere noticeable in her sudden, frantic behavior. Dear heavens. She could see – no, actually *feel* her fear. Fear for the man with the white hair. Papa, as the girl called him.

"Good, begin. Amulet. Frigid. Evolve."

Somewhere in the distance, the woman could hear the boys' excited voices. Lucas was rambling about something she couldn't understand. Dustin was asking what the hell was happening to the alien – something about her eyes rolling back and her body tensing up.

"Airplane. Eleven, repeat the words. Apricot."

"Would you like a jelly baby? Should reverse the polarity of the neutron flow. Laugh hard, run fast – come along, Pond! Bigger on the inside – always bigger."

"Peninsula. Game. Enchantment."

"Did you hear that?" Dustin asked. "I thought I heard a, a voice."

"Yeah. I think it's working," Mike replied.

Don't, the woman thought, trying to warn her. *Stay away, Eleven. It'll be too much for you.*

"Mouse. Balloon."

"All of time and space, anything that ever happened or ever will... where do you want to start? After all, I'm just an idiot! With a box! And a screwdriver!"

"Did you hear that?"

"She's doing it! She's finding him!"

"This is crazy!" Dustin yelled.

"Calm down," Lucas said, sounding annoyed. "She just closed her eyes."

There was just a slight buzzing – then a loud, electronic *pop* as the device went to a whole new frequency. A few seconds later, the room was filled with an eerily familiar voice. "Mom?"

"Holy – what is *that*?"

"It's Will, idiot! Listen!"

They heard another voice – female, this time – who screamed: "Will? Will, is that you, baby?"

"Mom? Mom? Mom!"

"No way," Lucas gasped breathlessly.

"Will?" Mike asked. "Will, can you hear us?"

"Mom!"

"Will! Oh, baby, I'm here, I'm here! Oh, thank God!"

"He can't hear us. Why can't he hear us?"

"How am I supposed to know, dipshit!"

"One-way frequency," the woman almost whispered, still with the absent look in her eyes. "Can't communicate. Only listen."

"Oh God, Will, Will!"

"Mom? Mom, it's coming!"

"Tell me where you are! How do I get to you?"

There was a brief stuttering in the frequency as Will apparently tried to catch his breath and looked around. "It's like home, but it's so dark... It's so dark and empty! And it's cold! Mom? Mom, I'm scared!"

"Listen to me, okay?" His mother sounded like she was just on the verge of collapsing. Which wasn't that weird, given that their own mental state wasn't exactly doing too well, either. The frequency was getting a bit lower, but it wasn't like any normal interference – this was the sound of something *big*.

"I swear I'm gonna get to you, okay? But right now, I need you to hide. Can you hide?"

"Mom, please!"

"I know, baby, I know. I will find you, I promise. But I need you to be safe now! Can you hide?"

There was another short silence before Will replied: "There's a box... but –"

"Okay, good! Get in it and hide, sweetie. *Hide!*"

"But mom, I can't get it open! It's locked! Please..."

"Just try it! You need to try it, okay? Try... try hiding behind it! Right, baby? *Go!*"

There wasn't anything else they could hear. Just moments after they had heard his mother frantically begging for him to hide, there was another loud *pop*, although this one certainly sounded less better than the previous one. And if that wasn't enough, they got the rest of their proof later, as the Heathkit suddenly made a weird, buzzing sound and exploded in a rain of little sparkles and smoke. Eleven slumped back in her chair, letting go of the woman as her cheeks turned a dark color and her nose started to bleed. Not finding anything to lean on, the woman toppled over and ended up on the floor, letting out a deep sigh as life returned to her eyes.

There wasn't much time to sort things out – apparently the smoke had tripped the sprinkler system. A loud, whooping siren started to swell in the corridors as sprayers of water turned on above their heads.

"El, are you okay?" Mike shouted. "Can you move?"

"Here, help her up." Lucas said. "We need to get out of here."

"What about the alien?" Dustin asked.

"I'm... I'm fine," the woman responded, slowly getting up. "You lot go ahead. I'll be right after... after ya."

Not finding anything suitable to transport Eleven with, they just decided to put her on the small metal trolley in the corner. Dustin opened the door and poked his head out to check the corridor. After he signaled that the coast was clear, a rather strange procession left the AV room. It consisted of a few boys pushing a nose-bleeding girl with a blonde wig on a cart with race-like speed, and a rather strange woman waddling behind them, occasionally grabbing her head as she grunted and puffed.

The fact that no one saw them leaving was just pure luck.

8. Chapter 7

[A/N: Decided to break my promise and do some more of these. I really enjoyed writing 13 this chapter (when do I not?), felt like she was channeling a lot of 12, 11 and a bit of 10 as well. Things are really getting rolling now so I'm thrilled!

Also, thank you so much for the nice comments. Seeing that I have a couple of regulars is just wonderful!]

Chapter 7: Boy in the Box

It was almost funny how simple life became once it was purely reduced to one thing. Will had found this once he had stumbled over the lines of reality and darkness, into realms he'd only seen in his nightmares. He was terrified. Lost and alone, he had been wandering around in this new, cold world, screaming for his mother, Jonathan and his friends until his lungs felt like dry sandpaper. When it became clear to him the chance that anyone would hear him – let alone the people he loved – was virtually nonexistent, he simply broke down sobbing, sitting on top of some mushy black branch and crying his eyes out until he had no tears left. Once he had calmed down (which could've been after a couple of hours, but a couple of days as well), he tried to make some sense of the situation. Fact 1: He was in an unknown, dark place. A bad place. It reminded him strangely well of the Vale of Shadows in Dungeons & Dragons, but thinking about that made his eyes water, so he decided not to. It all seemed so long ago. Almost an eternity. How much longer would it last?

But that brought him to Fact 2: There was nobody coming for him, at least not for a very long time. In a way, these two facts simplified his life more than he was comfortable with. There was just the matter of *survival* in this weird, new existence. All other things secondary. And that was it.

So he set out to find a place to sleep and something remotely digestible. He spent the first night (although he preferred to measure time by how much his stomach was hurting, since it always seemed

to be night in this place) at a small, unrecognizable shed overtaken by an explosion of black, oozing vines. When he woke up, he wandered around in what he thought was a couple of vegetable gardens, although the vegetables surely didn't look like anything remotely resembling plants. Still hungry, he decided to take something he thought was a tomato, and he went back to his shed to have a little bite. Bad call. After a couple of hours of intense pains coursing through his empty stomach and nearly throwing up every single ounce of liquid he still had in his body, he decided it was best to go on a diet for a while.

There were other developments as well, for sure. There was the creature he dubbed the Demogorgon (it hurt to think of those little references to old times, but he simply couldn't get them out of his head) that was still looking for him, enraged that he kept failing to catch his prey. Will had the benefit of being good at hiding, but he was wondering how much longer he could manage to stay out of sight of the menacing, snarling creature. How long it would take either for the damned thing to catch him, or for his body to give up on its own.

Then he found his home. It wasn't his home, of course, nothing in here felt like home although it sure had the appearance, but it would do for now, and he spent the time walking around in the empty, overgrown rooms. He had found a way to contact his mother, which seemed like a blessing by this time, but always before he had the chance to properly speak to her, the creature would come again, hissing and snarling as it clawed his way through the house. Feeling like he should do his best to protect his family, he ran to lure the Demogorgon away. It worked... but it wasn't getting any better for him.

And, of course, all of this was before he found the box.

The first time he came across it, he did stop to have a look, but only because its presence seemed so... so *out of place*. It was the first thing that felt truly unreal to him – and *that* had to mean something, right? After all, it wasn't like all of this wasn't in some way absolutely surreal, although it sure as hell didn't feel like that anymore. This worried him. How long had it been since he stumbled into this world? One day? Two days?

Survival. All other things secondary.

The box was sitting in a pit filled with more of those nasty black vines, a bit leaning over, almost as if it was thrown in there by an oversized child. The plants had covered most of it as well, although Will could make out a dark blue color and the letters OLIC ALL BOX on a black panel at the top. He walked along the edge of the pit for a while, circling to study every side of the strange object. The only doors seemed to be on the front. There was a lamp on the roof, but it wasn't lit. The glass panel on the right door was shattered by a thick branch which appeared to have crawled inside. Will tried to have a peek, but all he could see was pitch blackness. Yet he could hear the strange growling the plants made, although it sounded almost... hollow. Like there was more space in the box than there appeared to be from the outside.

He took a step back and noticed the bright white panel on the left door. There was some mold on it. Wiping it off with his sleeve, he uncovered a plate, which read:

POLICE TELEPHONE

FREE

FOR USE OF

PUBLIC

ADVICE & ASSISTANCE

OBTAINABLE IMMEDIATELY

OFFICERS & CARS

RESPOND TO ALL CALLS

PULL TO OPEN

Well, that didn't appear to leave any room for doubts. A bit hesitantly, he reached out to grab the shining handle on the right door, but the moment his fingers touched the cold steel he pulled back with a loud gasp. He wasn't sure whether it was just his tired

mind playing tricks on him, but it almost felt like an electric shock had shot through him. Well, yeah, an electric shock, but not one you could feel physically... it had been a... What was the word? *mental* one. Shrill and short, like the yell of a kid: a cry for help.

His curiosity now taking over, he reached out again, but he didn't feel the shock this time. There was merely a slight humming, which could just as well be the echoes from the forsaken landscape outside the pit. He pulled. Didn't work. He pushed, but that didn't work either; the door was stuck in its place, not moving one bit. He let go, sighing deeply, and took a step back to question the nature of the strange thing. He was fairly certain Hawkins didn't have phone booths anymore, and especially not this kind. What the hell was a police box anyway?

He decided to leave the place and go back to his home, since there didn't appear to be a very useful hiding spot around. Yet, as he crawled out of the pit and looked back over his shoulder, he couldn't help but feel almost a certain... *pity* for the box. It just sat there, lost and alone, almost as if it was a kid who got lost in the woods and gave up all hope.

Well, there you have it. he thought. I've finally gone insane. I'm bonding with a dumb piece of wood.

No, that wasn't true. Well, maybe, but it almost certainly wasn't all there was to it. He hadn't imagined that short moment of connection, the shrill cry for help in his mind. Had he?

Shaking his head, he took off and left the pit behind, the box sinking in the blackness.

This was all *before* the thin layer of grease and dark growth disappeared and he could actually feel, no, *see* the face of his mother.

"Mom?" A feeling of utter joy and relief overcoming him, he started to cry her name, his face becoming soaked with tears. "Mom? Mom? Mom! Mom!"

From the other side of the red layer, the voice of his mother came,

just as frantic and hysterical as his own: "Will! Oh, baby, I'm here, I'm here! Oh, thank God!"

"Mom? Please come get me! *Please!*"

"Oh God, Will, Will!"

He tried listening to what she was saying (not that she was saying much else other than crying his name over and over, which he couldn't blame her for, to be honest), but he suddenly heard another, deeper sound. He looked over his shoulder, taking frantic, asthmatic breaths. He saw a shadow slowly creeping up driveway that led to their house.

"Mom?" He said, turning to the red surface again. "Mom, it's coming!"

"Tell me where you are! How do I get to you?"

He barely managed to catch his breath again and he looked around, trying to possibly come up with *any* words that could describe this horrible place. "It's like home, but it's so dark... It's so dark and empty! And it's cold! Mom? Mom, I'm scared!"

"Listen to me, okay?" Oh, God. It was getting closer. It was getting *so much closer*. "I swear I'm gonna get to you, okay? But right now, I need you to hide. Can you hide?"

"Mom, please!"

"I know, baby, I know. I will find you, I promise. But I need you to be safe now! Can you hide?"

He drew breath to say that he couldn't think of any place where he would even be a little bit safe for the hideous thing that was currently creeping up on him, but from somewhere in the depths of his mind came a vision. He *did* think of a place. It was like the memory was simply inserted in his brain.

"There's a box...but –"

"Okay, good! Get in it and hide, sweetie. *Hide!*"

"But mom, I can't get it open! It's locked! Please..."

"Just try it! You need to try it, okay? Try... try hiding behind it! Right, baby? *Go!*"

He didn't allow himself the comfort of replying to her. Turning around, he started to run, nearly tripping over all sorts of obstacles that seemed to suddenly appear as he prayed he could manage to pick up speed. The creature let out a low, bellowing scream behind him. He ran for his life, not once looking back to see how far the beast had caught up with him, or to have a last look at the face of his mother before the thin window between worlds closed again. The box had to be open. He *needed* the box to be open.

He wasn't sure whether it was the fuel of his adrenaline that made him arrive at the pit before the monster caught him, or if the damn thing was simply slowing down because he wanted some fun with his little prey before he devoured it, but he also didn't care. He wasn't able to slow down in time and instead fell into the pit, hitting some of the branches as he cried out in pain. Now purely driven by his will to survive rather than his own physical strength, he crawled up and limped towards the closed blue doors. He fell against it, gripping the handle, pulling and pushing, but the doors remained shut. He could hear the monster approaching the pit.

"Please!" he screamed, simply forgotten that in all his panic and fear he was talking to a *wooden box*. "Please, you *have to* open! *You have to!*"

Forget it. The doors weren't opening. The creature sounded closer, so much closer. It wouldn't probably take long before he would see its mouth at the top of the pit, flaps contracting in triumph as it would let out a final snarl and come for him. He wondered whether it would hurt.

No! *No!* He wasn't going to die. He could still hide behind the box. He gripped one of the corners and started dragging himself to the other side, his breath coming with short, frantic gasps. Before he could even reach the other side, however, he suddenly heard a strange, humming noise. He could feel the wooden surface vibrate under his fingers. Out of nowhere, the doors opened, and he fell inside. He felt

a dizziness overcoming him as he struggled to get up to close them again, but it appeared he didn't have to. He caught a last glimpse of an open mouth full of teeth before the doors slammed shut and a loud, resounding *thud* shook everything around him. He held his breath. The creature tried to get in, slamming against the doors one, two, *three* times, but he didn't manage to get through. God knew how it was possible.

Eventually, the Demogorgon just appeared to give up as Will heard a low growling and cracking of vines, indicating that it had commenced its retreat. He didn't stop listening until he could hear nothing but the faint rumbling from the plants outside and the strange, soft humming around him.

Then he just collapsed, closing his eyes with the feeling of cold metal against his cheeks.

"So you think Will is in the same place as your... what did you call it again?" Mike asked. They were back in the basement of the Wheeler home to think and discuss about what they had been confronted with in the AV room. He was restlessly leaning against the wall, trying to simultaneously listen to the woman and keeping an eye on Eleven, who was laying on the couch, seemingly drained after her small outburst at school.

"TARDIS," the woman said. "Time And Relative Dimension In Space, in case you were wonderin. And yes, I presume so."

"Why? Just because he said there was a box? It could just as well have been a cardboard one, or, I dunno, a wooden one."

"It's made of wood."

"You know what I mean."

"Of course. I also said that I wasn't certain. It's more of an itch, honestly."

"Which doesn't have to mean anything."

"Not at all. Statistically, the chance that it doesn't mean anything is

well over ninety-nine percent. No, round that off to sixty, I can afford myself to be a little arrogant. Anyhow, it's about the only thing I got."

"Besides the fact that Will is *alive* and we could hear him *talking*," Mike said, rolling his eyes. The woman, who had been pacing around the room (claiming that it had been impossible to think with all the thoughts swarming about when she simply stood at one spot), briefly stopped to stare blankly at the supercomm on the ground. "Ya. That's unusual. It's quite the conundrum if you ask me."

"It's crazy." Dustin said. He was sitting on one side of the opposite couch while Lucas sat on the other – his friend had gone remarkably quiet after they had gotten home. "It's like he was *in* the Heathkit or something. Almost like *Poltergeist*."

The woman stopped dead in her tracks to cast him a funny look. "Poltergeist?"

"Yeah, the movie?"

"Seriously? You're really lucky that most races don't have broadband connection. The collective ego of the universe would increase with two hundred percent if they'd notice how many movies you're makin about them."

"Look, what if we just focus on the other things he said," Mike sighed. "He said something about home. That was it right, home and dark?"

"And empty," Lucas said, speaking up for the first time. "Empty and cold."

"Wait, did he say cold?"

"I don't know. The stupid radio kept going in and out."

Dustin sighed. "It's like riddles in the dark."

The woman felt the need to speak up, but couldn't think of anything to say. The whole situation was frustrating her. She liked riddles, of course – mysteries kept her going, but it was a lot less fun when there was something important at stake and she had no clue how to go further. In some way she felt like she was being tested. *Is that what*

you want? she asked no one in particular. Push me to see how far I can get before I either collapse or give up? My past just incoherent strings of vague memories and yet expectin me to rely on all sorts of instincts I'm not sure I can trust? No TARDIS? No sonic? I'd say you're up to your greatest challenge so far, you mad, old...

And all of a sudden, there was a dark thought that crossed her mind só easily and purely that it simply terrified her. But of course, it doesn't have to be that way... just get them to help you find the old box. Everything gets better once you have the old box. You'll remember who you are, bring the boy home, and you can take right off to save a civilization or be a hero where they need you more than they do here...

No! No! This was not who she was. Sure, finding the TARDIS mattered just as much to her than overcoming this feeling of disorientation, but she could not let stand either of them in the way of helping these children find their friend. After all, given that Will was probably lost as well in a world that felt new and scary to him, they weren't so different at all.

...And then there was that girl, but –

"Guys, come on, think about it!" Mike sneered. "When El took us to find Will, after we found the alien, she took us to his house, right?"

"Yeah," Lucas said, frowning. "But he wasn't there."

"But what if he was there? What if we just couldn't see him? What if he was on the other side? What if this is Hawkins," He turned the board, "...and this is where Will is? The Upside Down."

"Like the Vale of Shadows," Dustin said, almost breathlessly. The woman noticed Eleven stirring a little, but she decided not to mention it. The boys hurried to get around the table as Dustin pulled up one of the trivia books for Dungeons & Dragons.

"The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world." he read out loud. "It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. It is right next to you, and you don't even see it."

"Sounds lovely," Lucas scoffed.

"So it's like an alternate dimension?" Mike asked. He wanted to say more, but found himself unable to as they all jumped at the sudden gasp behind them. The woman was staring at them with wide eyes, mouth open, almost as if she was choking on something. "Oh, hold on! Hold on! I'm rememberin something!"

"Oh God, she's not having another heart attack, is she?" Lucas yelled, preparing himself to catch her.

"No. Shut up. All of you, shut up."

"We're not even day thing anyth –"

"Yes you are." the woman said, putting a finger on his lips. The boy didn't exactly look pleased, but he was not moving either. "You're thinkin. Stop it. Can't think when all of those little brainwaves are distractin me."

The boys casted each other surprised looks, not sure whether to do anything. Eleven appeared to have fallen asleep. Mike seemed to find the whole situation rather hilarious, and Dustin was just watching all of it with a big grin on his face.

"Oh yes. It's comin back... well, a tiny bit. Dimensions and stars and parallel universes and blue fish and... oh." Her eyes lit up. "Oh, brilliant. That's fantastic!"

"What is it?"

"Quick. Fast. Need somethin... somethin to scratch... somethin to chalk my thoughts..."

She frantically looked around the room, then jumped on the couch, barely managing to steady herself on the bouncy cushions. For some reason she started scratching the wall, tearing small pieces of wallpaper off with her nails.

"Hey, stop that!" Mike yelled.

"For God's sake Mike, give her a marker before she messes up your

whole wall!" Dustin answered, screaming in his ear. The boy quickly ran upstairs to get one and returned, swiftly handing it to the woman. "Here. But... just what are you doing?"

"Writin down my thoughts. There, very nice. Now, where are we?"

"Uh, in the basement?"

"No, not that!" the woman sneered, waving with her hand like she was trying to swat a fly. "Where are we, now and when?"

"Hawkins, November... the tenth?"

"Yeah," Lucas replied. "Thursday. They're having Will's funeral tomorrow."

"Right, 1983..." The woman scribbled a circle on the wall with the numbers in the middle. She drew another one just a few inches right of it, but left this one empty, tapping on it with her fingers as she frowned and thought. "So a dark place. And cold. Different?"

"An alternate dimension," Dustin said. The woman looked up, seemingly annoyed. "But alternate dimensions don't pop up out of nowhere. Well, they're pretty much all around you since they exist in the same universe, but it isn't... you can't just cross over from one to the other."

"No, you need Shadow Walk for that."

"Jesus, Dustin, shut up." Lucas groaned.

"It's almost like I'm missin something... but *what*?" She bit her lower lip, tapping with the marker in the emptiness of the circle – until she suddenly stopped. "It's 1983."

"Well, yeah, we've established that pretty much already."

"No, I don't just mean the year." She turned to them. "The Cold War. The international conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union that led to division and distrust all over the world. Key points being the Cuban Missile Crisis and the separation of Germany and Berlin with the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall. The nuclear threat

was immense. 44 dark years of humanity stuck in an iron grip, all the way up until the fall of the Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991."

The boys just stared her. "Wait, the Soviet Union is going to *collapse*?" Lucas asked, unbelievably. The woman pulled an awkward face. "Oh, shoot. Ignore everything I've just said. Spoilers. Anyhow, all of this makes me think of somethin."

"Well, tell us." Mike said. "You've been saying things for five minutes and I still don't understand any of them."

"Right. Yeah. Look, what if your friend – Will – is not just stuck in an alternate dimension, but in an alternate *future*?"

"Uh... no, still doesn't make sense."

"But that can't be," Lucas said. "I mean, you can't change time, right? It's all fixed. Cause and effect."

"No!" the woman said, pointing at them with the marker and a wide smile on her face before she turned to the wall and started drawing. "I don't blame you for gettin it wrong, honestly. People always assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect..." She drew a straight line from the circle with the current date to the empty one. "...but *actually*, from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint – it's more like a giant bowl of soup. With lots of noodles. Much timey-wimey stuff... Am I havin a deja vu?"

The kids stared at the enormous amount of lines she'd randomly scribbled all over the wall. It looked like a toddler's drawing.

"Meaning...?" Mike asked, still unsure of what it all meant.

"Well, look at it like this. Every sentient being has the most powerful ability in the entire universe; the ability to change time and space. The ability to make choices. Imagine if you could choose between a bowl of custard and a bowl of cereal for breakfast. Of course you choose for custard, but have you ever wondered about what could've happened if you had picked the other choice?"

"Nothing," Lucas answered. "It would basically be the same, right?"

"No, 'course not," The woman smiled. "Every single choice has an impact on the course of time and history. All those choices, all those considerations, they all help to shape the universe you're livin in. Maybe if you'd picked the cereal, you would have choked on it. Well, that's a bad example, but you get the point. The question is: what happens to the other versions? What happens to the version of reality where you picked the cereal?"

"Well I suppose they just –"

"They keep existing," Dustin almost whispered, gaping at her with the captivation of a child that had just encountered his favorite superhero.

"Absolutely brilliant, Dustin. You're right. They keep on existin. Caught up in the timey-wimey-soup."

"So that means there are literally millions of other versions of us out there?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah. No. Well, not quite, but if it helps..."

"Never mind," Mike said, "so, if I get this correctly, you're saying that Will is trapped in an alternate future of Hawkins?"

"Sort of. It's my presumption at this moment. The dark and the cold and the empty reminded me of the Cold War, sort of... where the nuclear devastation already happened."

Lucas interrupted: "Wait. Look, I know this got nothing to do with all of this... but ma'am, are you saying we're eventually going to end up in a nuclear war?"

The boys all suddenly stared at her, an uncomfortable silence filling the room. Even Eleven seemed to listen along, raising her head from the cushion. The woman simply looked at them. She was aware of the fear that had sounded through the boy's voice, but she knew she shouldn't. She *couldn't*.

"I can't tell you," she said, softly. "Major historical events should always be treated with a certain respect. I can't tell you about your future. You could end up tryin to change it – even unconsciously. It

would cause ripples which would shatter the entire fabric of time and space."

"So you're refusing to tell us if this is all worth it. If we're going through all of this just to end up being vaporized, or something."

"Just the fact that a version of that future exists doesn't mean it's going to happen. As I said, time isn't fixed. It's flexible. Aside from that, boys, if I may ask you a honest question: do you *feel* it's worth it?"

That question silenced them. They could feel its weight like lead pressing on their shoulders. Eventually, Mike shrugged, and said: "Anything for Will. No matter what."

"Yeah, man, we're doing it for Will." Dustin chimed in.

Finally, Lucas nodded as well. "We can't let him down."

The woman smiled. "That's more like it."

"How can we rescue him, though?" Mike asked. "El could channel him, so it *must* be possible in some way, right?"

"Well, it's not that hard. Basically, all you'd need is just one fixed trandimensional connection between two powerful flux points –"

"Uh, you're at it with the impossible language again."

The woman rolled with her eyes. "Fine then. Just give me a sandwich."

"Me too, actually." Dustin said. "Haven't been able to have a snack since school. I'm starving."

"Man, screw you." Mike scoffed. "Do you want something on it, ma'am?"

"Jelly. Lots of jelly. As long as it's flexible and bouncy."

Mike went upstairs again to grab the things his strange guest had requested. By the time he returned, Eleven was fully sitting up again,

curiously watching all of the things happening around her. He handed the food over to the woman, who apparently wasn't planning on eating it – she *studied* it.

"Right then," she said. "Imagine these two pieces of bread being two planes. In this case, the top one is Hawkins now, and the bottom one is Hawkins in a possible future. The layer separating these two planes – the jelly – is the fabric of space and time. Now 'spose you're a traveller. Would you be able to go from the top one to the bottom one?"

"No," Dustin answered. "You'd get stuck in the jelly."

"Exactly. It's space and time, and it has rules. But rules can be bent, of course. Know an awful lot about that... anyway, now imagine the two planes closin in on each other. Like this." She pushed the two pieces of bread together. It was a rather casual act, but the boys watched it as if it was rocket science. "Just until the point where... there." She poked a finger through it. "Where the layer of space and time has become so thin you could practically drive a hole through it and travel between the two planes. In comprehensible terms, this would be called a wormhole. I suspect this is how Will got missing."

"Damn. It really is an Upside Down," Lucas said.

"In a way, I 'spose."

"But how did he get through one?" Mike asked. "I mean, it's not like he's just fallen into one, right?"

"No, of course not. They're not littered about like some kind of rabbit holes. Apparently, there's somethin around here that generated so much energy it's literally torn a hole in the fabric of reality. Big enough for a boy to go through. And a TARDIS, presumably."

For some reason, all heads slowly turned to Eleven. The girl was just sitting there, on the couch, staring straight forward as she tried to evade the curious looks. She seemed visibly nervous. Noticing her uneasy posture, the woman quickly straightened up. "Right then. Currently there's a lot of questions and I know you're dyin for answers, but you better get some sleep. After all, there's your friends

funeral tomorrow."

"It doesn't even make sense," Dustin sulked, although he quickly shut up when the woman threw him the sandwich.

"Come on, we have to do this for his family." Mike said. "Oh, and promise you won't tell anybody about what we've been discussing here."

"No need to. I think my parents will send me to a nut house if I tell them even a single thing about tonight." Lucas answered. Dustin looked at him with a funny face. "Really? I think opening your mouth is just enough."

"Oh, you're such an ass, man."

"Bet you'd like to kiss me then," Dustin pursed his lips, causing the boys to burst out in a loud bawling and laughter. Even the woman smiled a bit. While what they had discovered tonight was just the next small piece in a great, macabre puzzle, neither of them had forgotten how to laugh – and they all regarded this as a good thing.

While the boys said goodbye and made arrangements for tomorrow, Eleven slowly retreated to her place on the couch, resting her head against the cushions. She felt the fatigue creeping up on her again. When she closed her eyes to allow the sleep to take hold of her body, she caught a last glimpse of the woman standing in front of the wall, sleeves rolled up, hands in her pockets, thinking about dimensions and strange places El could only dream about. She kept seeing the image, even long after she felt herself slowly drifting away in the darkness. The woman. What she meant. Who she was.

Eleven slept, and *she remembered*.

9. Chapter 8

[A/N: Hi fam! Firstly, let me apologize for not updating in some time. There was an important personal project I wanted to finish and I have some exams coming up, so it's possible updating will still be a tad slow the coming week(s). I hope to be picking up again next week though.

Now, however, another chapter for all you lovelies! (And a spectacular new character introduction!)]

Chapter 8: The Mad Man with a box

"Papa! Papa!"

He never said anything. Just looked. Always looked. He just stood there, arms crossed, staring with that cold, thoughtful frown as they dragged her through the corridors. She kicked, she cried and she begged, but he wouldn't listen. The men in the white shirts were hurting her, but he didn't care. Or maybe he did – but he decided to ignore it because he thought she deserved a punishment.

Eleven didn't understand the nature of 'punishment'. She always thought you would get punishment once you had done something bad, because it would teach you not to do it again. But the things Papa asked from her... were they good things? Surely finding and listening to strange people wasn't that bad, she even liked to think of it as a game of some sort, but hurting animals, *hurting and killing* animals was entirely different. It didn't feel good. She didn't want to do it. And so she would refuse, every time, and Papa would punish her for it. Because she wasn't listening to him, which was a bad thing but listening to him was a bad thing as well, only would she not get punished if she listened to him – and could you please explain how *that* was not confusing?

Oh, it didn't matter. Not now. Now she was on her way to another lonely session in the empty room.

"Papa!"

She managed to kick one of the men, but he immediately snapped back at her, twisting her arm. She cried out in pain. Of course she could stop him if she wanted to, but she didn't. She knew Papa wanted to see her do it, fighting back against the men, but she wouldn't; it was simply a bad thing.

They carried her to the open door of the empty room. Threw her in. She fell to the hard tiles and managed to crawl up, just in time to see one last glimpse of their stone cold faces as they pushed the door shut and the lock clicked with a metallic *thunk*.

"Papa," she said, now softly, and she started to sob. It was of no use, the door surely was soundproof and even if it wasn't, she doubted that Papa would listen to her ("*you've been bad so you deserve punishment, Eleven*"), but once the waterworks had turned on, you could hardly stop them. Besides, what else was there to do? Crying made her sleep easier.

She cried until she felt she had no tears left, then carefully sank down on the floor. She put a hand under her head and stared into the darkness, listening to the rhythmic beating of her own heart. The questions always came after the sobbing. What it all meant. Whether this existence was all there was to her life, and if she'd ever got to experience one without all the pain and the punishment and the coldness. Whether she would ever know *love*. She had heard this word a couple of times, not just in her dreams and her trips to the darkness but also from Papa, although he never seemed very eager to talk about it. He never seemed eager to talk with her about normal things. Eleven was alone, but she was smart enough to understand that there was more than this *bad* place with its concrete walls and eerily humming machines and people in white suits. There was a *world* beyond this. If she had been nice and listened to what Papa told her to do (and even then it was still rare), he would sometimes tell her things. About cars. About toys and how they worked. About televisions, which were a sort of weird machines in which people were locked up, but not completely because it was supposedly only an image – working via a kind of telepathic connection like hers. She enjoyed hearing about these things, for sure. But there were some things he didn't tell her about. Like love.

Eventually, exhaustion made way for sleep, and sleep made way for

dreams. The experience of the cold around her disappeared into a vague, warm mist. With the little consciousness she had she hoped there wouldn't be any nightmares. The empty room was bad, but nightmares were even worse, because they would haunt and scare and terrify her and when she woke up, there would only be more coldness. *Please*, she thought, *let there be no monsters. No darkness. No alone.*

There were no nightmares. What *did* appear in Eleven's dark subconsciousness, however, was so strange and new that it scared her a little. She had a dream in which she saw a large, round room, filled with twirling steam and all sorts of bright lights and funny bubbly noises. In the middle of the room was a sort of red, bright column which kept emitting a weird, screeching sound. The noise was very clear in her head – almost as if she was standing right next to it. It seemed to *talk* to her. Maybe if she could-

Eleven stirred a little in her sleep. In the dream, something new, no, an actual *figure* had appeared. A man was hopping up and down around the column, turning all sorts of levers and pushing buttons as he kept yelling at the machine. It was almost kind of funny. She couldn't hear him as clearly as the noise, but he seemed to shout about "telepathic circuits being jammed again" and "picking up weird signals". He actually *pleaded* "her" to tell him what was wrong.

Not knowing that he meant the machine and not her, Eleven started to think. The machine seemed capable of talking to her. So what if she told it to get here? To the empty room? It wouldn't fit, for sure, but it was worth a try. Eleven was so intrigued by this new phenomenon that it was practically impossible to let it go without seeing what it meant. So she focused on the noise, kind of tried to speak to it like she would when she had to listen to the strange men. It seemed to work. The man still couldn't hear her, but the noise kept only growing louder.

VWOOOOOOOORP

VWOOOOOOOOORP

VWOOOOOOOOORP

THUD

Eleven sat up. That sound had *definitely* not been a dream. She looked around, hoping to see at least a bit of smoke or hear a loud, bubbling *bloop*, but there was nothing. Just the brightly lit tiles of the empty room. Could it have been a dream after all?

No, she was sure she had heard it – otherwise she wouldn't even have jumped up. It had to be outside. The small girl quietly got up and walked over to the door, putting a hand against the metallic surface. If Papa had been alerted by the noise, he would surely be already out there with some of the Bad Men who had guns. But that automatically meant she had to warn the man. They could *kill* him.

She concentrated and carefully pried the lock open with her mental hands. The Bad Man thought they had made the door strong enough to withstand her, but in fact it hadn't taken her long to figure out how to open it. She just decided to save the opportunity for a better moment. Like now, for example.

Eleven opened the door – and stopped dead in her tracks the moment she set a foot outside.

The corridor was blocked by a strange object. It was a blue box, with windows and a lantern on top of it which emitted a soft glow. The sign above the doors was hard to read because some letters were still a bit difficult to her, but she thought it said POLICE BOX, although she still had no clue what that was supposed to mean. Not that she understood any of it anyway. She recognized the machine because of the vague humming, but that was all.

The right door suddenly opened and a huge cloud of steam came rolling out. The cloud was followed by the man she had seen in her dream, who was coughing loudly and waving his hand around. He seemed a bit odd. His hair was grey (a bit like Papa's, although his was more white) and his face looked old. He was wearing a dark red sort of coat with a single bright red button on each sleeve and dark trousers. He looked a bit like Papa, yeah, but there was just something about him that made them incredibly different as well, though she didn't know what it was. Yet.

"What's the matter?" he asked, and it took her a little while to understand that he was talking to the machine again and not to her. His voice had a funny accent. "You never do this! Are you having whims again? Was the Vesuvius a bit too much for you?"

The box emitted a whooping cough which sounded like a bit of a snarl. He shook his head. "Of course I know your telepathic circuits are jammed! You've been acting up ever since we came in proximity of 1980's America! What's wrong, are the big hairdos upsetting you?" He started to walk around the box, inspecting each side. "Stop overreacting. Everything in the 80's is big. Save for your tolerance, that is."

The box blooped an indignant-sounding protest. If Eleven hadn't been so scared, she probably would have found it funny. The man's head suddenly popped up on the other side and she quickly recoiled. "Don't you dare calling me that! As far as I can tell, I am the only one being useful around here! Now if you could just shut up for a minute, I can try to figure out what caused those telepathic waves. Just a short scan should do."

He pulled out a weird, blue stick-like object which buzzed slightly as he waved it around. Maybe it was a scanner of some sort, like the ones Papa and the Bad Men used. He kept moving it in broad circles... until it finally landed on Eleven. She swallowed. He frowned a little, then lowered the scanner.

"Well, it appears I've found the source." He kneeled down. "Hello! What are you exactly? Some kind of a physical interface?"

He reached out to touch her, but she quickly stepped out of his reach. "Ah," he said. "No interface then? Are you an extraterrestrial species? Lost contact with your mothership?"

She didn't answer. Just looked at him. He seemed to be getting impatient again as he got up and looked around, trying to make some sense of the situation. "I have to say, this is quite a strange place to hang out. Especially for such a hypertelephatic creature like you. Is that really your only way to communicate, by the way?"

The box buzzed again. The man made an annoyed gesture. "Oh, shut

it. Of course I know it was a call for hel –"

And he fell silent. He looked at the girl again, and again (his stare was somehow worse than Papa's, Eleven thought, not only because it looked so grim, but also because it almost seemed to look right into her) before inspecting the scanner once more. "You aren't exactly an extraterrestrial, are you? No, of course not. Why did I ever think that. You're one of those weird little mini-humans." He smiled for the first time, although the expression on his face seemed a bit... distant. "I had a companion who used to teach a lot of you. Well, she called it teaching, I called it cattle herding. Don't know why she ever expected that bunch of shouting little monsters to learn anything. Oh well." He shook his head. "I shouldn't keep thinking so much about that. Right then, could you tell me your name?"

Eleven kept looking at him, blankly. He raised an eyebrow. "Can't you talk?"

She didn't answer his question, but she did put her arm forward to show him the black number tattooed on the skin. He briefly glanced at it before turning back to her. "Yes, very lovely. Look, I don't care if you lost your tongue, but I'd like to know who I'm shouting at because it wouldn't leave an impression otherwise. Whoever you are, you somehow managed to hack into my TARDIS' systems and you rather upset the old girl. So I'm going to ask you one more time: what's your name?"

She swallowed again, then said three simple words: "Eleven. I'm alone."

He didn't seem very impressed. In fact, he only sighed and raised his hands in a helpless gesture. "Oh well, so much for sensible communication. Alright, I will likely be not regretting this, but just in case I'm going to apologise in advance. A quick memory wipe should sort this out. You might end up slightly paralysed, but I suppose-

"Please!" She cried, and she leapt forward. She still wasn't anywhere near him but he seemed rather surprised by the gesture, immediately shutting up. "I know you can help me. Please help me. I don't want to be alone."

The hall went silent. For a slight second, she was truly terrified to her bones – she didn't who he was, she didn't know what he could do, she had no idea what he *would* do and the mere thought of it made her insides go cold. When he finally moved again, she could feel her muscles tense up; preparing to defend herself. Maybe Papa would get what he wanted. At last.

"I see," the man said. "Maybe that call wasn't an anomaly after all." He kneeled down once again to her level, his blue eyes piercing into her brown ones. "Tell me, Eleven, why are you alone?"

"Papa," she said.

"Papa? And what exactly does this "Papa" do to you?"

"He wants me to do bad things. If I don't do the bad things, he'll punish me."

The man sighed. "Typical child abuse. One of the few things I may despise more than a Dalek. No wonder the TARDIS picked up your signal. As much as all that technological development helped humanity to march forward, it had a lot of horrible consequences as well. Every revolution has its victims." He looked at her again. "Do you have any indication of where you are?"

"Bad place," she said, looking down. "And cold."

He shook his head. "Kept in the darkness from birth. Unbelievable. I'm going to set this right. I just need you to stay here and wait for me while I go ahead and find out what this place is. I did tell Cleopatra I would visit for pearl tea, but I suppose she can wait. As long as I stay ahead of the snakes. Literally and figuratively."

"Will you come back?" There was despair in her eyes, an utter expression of helplessness which tore deep into both hearts of the old man. He had seen planets die and galaxies fell apart, but there would never be anything worse than a child's pain. He knew why he was here. He knew he *had* to be here.

"I won't make any promises. But I will tell you my name. I'm the Doctor. Do you know what that means?"

Eleven shook her head. The man smiled. "That name means hope. Rescue. Saving civilizations and protecting the ones shackled by injustice and suppression. And if it comforts you, Eleven, that name means I'll come back for those who need it. Not many qualify for that, I admit, but hope does wonders."

"Hope?"

"Yes, hope. Just remember that word. Right, I'm off. There appears to be a shady government operation that requires my attention. Just stay right here."

Before she could answer, he was already off, running through the tiled corridor with the scanner glowing above his head. "And don't touch anything!" he shouted back. "She's very sensitive!"

Eleven wasn't sure, but she thought she could hear a low whirring from the box as the man ran out of sight. She was simply left in complete silence, standing in the open door of the empty room with the box just a few steps away from her. She looked at it again. The strong connection she had felt in her dream had calmed down again, but its mere presence was still very imposing. She carefully took a few steps around it to look at each side, but it really wasn't bigger from behind or something – it was practically as small as the empty room. But the room she had seen in her dream was clearly bigger. Surely that wouldn't fit in *there*, would it?

The longer the Doctor stayed away, the more her curiosity grew and gradually she dared to step closer. She even found the courage to go ahead and touch it. Of course, the odd man had said she wasn't supposed to, but she had a funny feeling he didn't actually *mean* everything he said. As she laid a hand against the blue surface, she expected it to feel rough, or at least a bit cold, but it was quite the opposite, almost warm. She wondered whether this was just an illusion, but in the end, did it matter? She knew the box was trying to comfort her. The mere knowledge was beyond anything she had ever felt until now.

Eleven wanted to walk back and try the doors, but before she could even grab the handle, she jumped and cried in fear as a loud alarm blared through the corridor and the lights turned red. She crouched,

expecting Papa to come marching through the hallway, ready to give her another punishment. But it wasn't Papa. It was the Doctor, looking slightly worried as his coat flailed behind him.

"Alright, I might have triggered some alarms and insulted a German Shepherd," he said. "Couldn't help it, I'm sorry. We better get out of here before he gets back at me for calling him neurotic!"

The moment he grabbed her and moved to push the door open, Eleven lost slightly track of time. She wasn't quite sure of the things that happened. First, he shoved her into the box, a bit too forcefully, and she tumbled in. Next, she was staring up at the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It was the column she had seen in her dream, but it was far more impressive in its full presence, and with the entirety of the glowing room around it. The Doctor ran around the console, flipping switches and pressing buttons as he kept shouting at her to close the door. Without him noticing, she found it in her mind and closed it. Immediately after she heard a thud behind her, the whole room seemed to wake up, lights flashing and the large rings above the column starting to turn. She heard the familiar resonating noise she had heard in her dream and felt the floor starting to shake under her feet.

"Taking off!" the Doctor yelled. "It might be a kind of a bumpy ride, so make sure to hang onto something!"

He hadn't even finished his sentence before the surface seemed to start moving under her feet. She quickly grabbed hold of the metal bar next to the door. The room shook and shuddered around her, groaning, almost *breathing*. The chaos lasted nearly five more minutes before the machine finally seemed to calm down. The Doctor pulled another lever and seemed visibly relieved as he took a step back and listened to the steady, regular pulsing around them. "Lovely. That took more effort than I expected. So, Eleven, what do you think?"

He rolled up his sleeves as he walked back to her, showing a somewhat broad smile. She just took it all in with the expression of a child who had encountered Santa Claus for the first time in their life. "Pretty."

"Yes, in fact it's dimensional eng- wait, what?" He looked confused.

"No, you're doing it wrong. You should be reacting to the fact that it's bigger on the inside and then I'm supposed to make a comment that stresses your ridiculously small comprehension. Oh, you know what, forget it. There are more important matters we should be attending to."

He walked back to the console and pulled one of the screens to him before starting to type on the keyboard. "Alright. Shamefully I've managed not as much information as I hoped I would, but at least I have some indication what's going on. Judging by the time period I'm guessing you've become a victim of that stupid mud fight between the United States and the Soviet Union." He snorted. "Humanity, always eager to find more ways to upgrade warfare. As if nuclear weapons weren't enough. Honestly, I liked you a lot better when you were crawling in the mud still trying to figure out how to walk."

He suddenly stopped typing and looked at Eleven with a strange expression in his eyes. "Although I have to say, a psychic *human* is quite interesting. I can see why you're so sought-after."

Eleven slowly started to retreat. She felt a sudden fear for the man, or rather for the strange expression that had appeared out of nowhere. She recognized it from Papa. The weird tone he always had in his voice when he told her about why she was so important to him and the Bad Men.

"Imagine being capable of knowing all of your enemy's secrets," the Doctor almost whispered. "Knowing what keeps them awake at night, all of their plans and their fears and their dreams. Imagine you could always be one step ahead of them. You could save lives. Thousands. Possibly millions."

For one second, Eleven was almost positive he would leap forward and grab her. He would take her arm like the Bad Men always did, and he would drag her away, far into the machine to put her in a small, cold room. But he didn't. He shook his head and turned around, once more circling the console. "Unfortunately it's also the one thing which destroys everything that distinguishes you from them. I won't stand for it. I will stop them, and I'll start by bringing you out of the reach of their greedy hands."

He pulled a lever again and Eleven wasn't quite sure what happened, but the whole room suddenly started to shake, the machine groaning around them as a sort of shiver shot up the column. The Doctor nearly fell back before he managed to gain balance again and rushed to push the lever back. "Oh, darn it! We can't leave her behind! You know we can't leave her behind!"

The machine just emitted an echoing groan in reply. He pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering something she could not understand. She didn't think it was a nice word.

"What's wrong?" she asked, after gathering a bit of courage.

"The TARDIS can't take off. She refuses to take such a powerful telepathic presence along. We can't leave earth."

He sighed, trying to contemplate the possibilities. They couldn't leave. He also refused to leave her behind in the hands of those monsters. He had to stop them, but without any help of the TARDIS. So what could he do?

It seems like you got yourself another challenge, Doctor. he thought. *What, did you expect the universe to let you go that easily?*

He went back to Eleven and kneeled down in front of her. "Listen," he said. "I'm terribly sorry for what you've been through, and I'm terribly sorry for the fact that I can't solve it right away. But I will make sure it will end. I just need a bit more of time and I need you to be strong in the meantime. Could you do that for me?"

She didn't answer, neither through nodding or shaking her head. There was just the stare of her small eyes. The Doctor felt the urge to smile. If it wasn't all so horrible, he would've found it hilarious. *Just when you thought it was impossible for you to ever go soft inside again.*

"Do you remember the meaning of my name?"

"Yes," she said. "Hope."

"That's right. And I know a lot of people have lied to you, just to abuse the trust they were blessed with. I don't need you to trust me, but I want you to remember that simple word. *Hope*. Think of it,

whenever you feel lost and alone, and you'll hear the sound of this old lady. Okay?"

"Is that a promise?"

She noticed she didn't just ask it, she *urged* him to say it. The light in his eyes seemed to go out for a bit. He had promised himself a long time ago not to make any promises anymore, which surely was a tad paradoxical, but it had felt necessary at that time. Now there was a creature in front of him which possibly didn't even understand what it meant. She had heard a lot of promises in her life, all to be broken. And for what? *Power?*

"If that helps you," he said. "Yes. That is a promise."

Eleven stood at the back of the empty room, looking on as the man hilariously struggled to close the heavy door. Before he shut it completely, he looked one more time at her, offering her a small nod. She nodded back, a small and fragile grin spreading across her lips. The door fell shut with a series of metallic clicks. A little later, she heard the *vwooping* noise of the box taking off, followed by a couple of shouts coming from the end of the corridor.

Papa questioned her, and she told him everything she knew; she had waken up because of the alarms, not quite sure what was going on.

She didn't know anything about a man.

10. Chapter 9

[A/N: Once again thanks so much for the nice comments! Here's one of my favorites: 13 finally gets to build her screwdriver!]

I'd also like to give a quick reply to a review by lautaro94, who's been following this story right from the start: thanks so much for the constructive criticism. I agree that the TARDIS being blocked by El's telepathy may seem a bit forced in there, but do note I make up the story as I go, so none of this is planned/plotted. I more or less wanted to figure out a way to exclude the TARDIS right from the beginning as that would leave no complications to solve. (Since the old lady is basically a giant *deus ex machina*) I'm still exploring the backstory with 12, so there's always room for surprising developments in the future. My reasoning for now is that with El being young and not yet having her telepathic senses under control, the TARDIS isn't quite ready to handle her presence. She might get more used to it, though.

Hope that explains it a bit!]

Chapter 9: Building a screwdriver

"Right, a couple of rules. Don't go upstairs before either Lucas, Dustin or me has told you it's safe. Don't steal any food, cookies or eggos except the stuff I've put on the table. Don't go out and talk to anyone about who you are. No explosions, strange sounds or smells, and absolutely no hyper-interdimensional portals opening up. Do you guys understand that?"

Mike looked at the duo on the couch with his hands on his sides. Eleven nodded, fumbling with the buttons on the woman's coat. He turned to the woman. "Ma'am?"

"Yes. No. I'm not sure. Could you repeat that one more time?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Just keep a low profile, okay? I don't want anyone finding out about you while we're going to Will's

funeral."

"Oh, don't you worry Mike." The woman smiled. "I'm an expert at keepin' a low profile. Really. Managed to pass for a Neptunian nurse for seven months straight."

"Yeah, and why am I having so much trouble believing that? Anyway, stay out of trouble. We'll see if we can find out more at the funeral." He nodded to Eleven. "I'll be back in just a couple of hours, El."

She nodded. She still found it difficult to see Mike go (a feeling which didn't seem to go away despite the frequency of it), but at least she had the woman with her. Her being around somehow made things easier to cope with. She guessed it was because she wouldn't be alone.

"Mike!" A male voice shouted from upstairs.

"Coming, dad!" Mike yelled back. He turned once more to his guests. "I'll see you guys later."

And gone he was, the wood creaking under his sneakers as he made his way upstairs. Eleven and the woman were left motionlessly listening to the noises on the floor above them as the Wheeler family prepared themselves. Each reacted in their own way when they finally heard the front door slam shut (which seemed like ages later); Eleven sighed deeply, the woman immediately jumped up only to start pacing across the room. The girl followed her with her eyes. It was almost funny how closely she reminded her of the odd man she had met that one night in the empty room. The same weird gestures, the same nonsense talk, and even the amount of strange natural authority she evoked whenever she spoke to her or the others. Yet Eleven wasn't exactly sure whether to fully rely on these instincts, because she knew there was more than what she had remembered last night. Something had happened after the arrival of the mad man with his blue box. She couldn't quite remember what it was, but maybe this was a good thing. She knew it was something bad, something dark. Possibly it was something that could stand in the way of trusting this woman. And she really, *really* wanted to trust her, because despite everything, there was this weird familiarity that felt so good. Warm, like the feeling she'd have when she would think

about Mike. That made her blush.

"Alrighty!" the woman piped up, "time for some more deduction. You like riddles, Eleven?"

"Riddles?" El asked.

"Yah, they're kinda like... I don't know, actually. Unsolvable little buggers that keep botherin' you until you managed to figure out how they work. I can't complain, I need somethin' to keep me busy, but this time someone's life may depend on it. Will's life. So we figured out how..." – she jumped on the couch and slapped on the wall – "this works, but there's still a bit I'm missin'. Think about it. That mysterious... gateway, what's so odd about that? Well, aside from the fact it's an interdimensional rift that should never have been there in the first place, of course."

El shrugged. "How it... appeared." she mumbled, carefully choosing her words.

"Yes. Obviously. Gateways don't appear out of nowhere. Somewhere around 'ere, someone generated so much... power, it was enough to tear into reality itself. That's a first." She quickly casted a glance at the girl. "Don't see that as a compliment. Or maybe do. I don't know, not a single species I know has ever been capable of that. And they probably wouldn't do it even if they could. Even Time Lords knew better than to mess with the limits of the space-time continuum. Besides, what purpose could it possibly serve?"

She jumped off the couch and started pacing again. "Of course, could be power. Classic who-has-the-biggest-one games, but humanity wouldn't be this stupid, would they? Have none of you listened the past 3000 years? *For real?*" She shook her head. "No, surely that couldn't be it, stupid. UNIT would already have this area completely sealed off, or burned down, for that matter. Not to mention the other 200 interstellar secret organizations keeping an eye on you lot. So that must mean it is a kind of accident. Or could you still classify this as an accident? Cosmic oopsie?" She stopped dead in her tracks. "Why am I trailing off so much? Come on, it's really not that hard! You're a bit shaken up, but your head's still intact! For the largest part, that is."

Eleven kept an eye on the woman as she walked back and forth. She felt sorry for her. Of course, finding Will was important to the young girl, but she knew there were other things that did matter. The woman probably realized this too, but rather than a simple goal, this was more of a purpose to her – it was all she cared about and the thought of not being able to accomplish it frightened her.

I'll come back for those who need it. Hope. Hope.

"So who did it is not important right now. What is important, however, is to find this particular rift. That's quite frankly the best chance we have at findin' Will. So in that case, the only difficulty is to track down the energy source." She smiled. "Oh, yes, I could do that, if I just had *my infernal sonic!*"

She rummaged through her pockets, but – again – couldn't find anything. Eleven asked: "Sonic?"

"Yes, sonic screwdriver. Just a simple device I could use to trace all kinds of energy. It's very nifty, but I seem to have lost it when I made that tumble to earth. Along with everything else." She sighed. "So I 'spose that's another dead end." Her face fell again and she sat down at one of the boxes across the room, hands folded in front of her mouth. Eleven wasn't exactly sure whether to be happy or feel sorry for her. She wanted the woman to find Will, to help him, but at the same time she knew the dangers she had to face when she would. Back in the depths of that awful place with the Bad Men was the darkness, the portal... and the monster. What would happen to the woman if she found it? What would happen to Mike?

"Unless..." The woman suddenly shot up as if struck by a lightning bolt. Eleven drew back, a little scared. "Oh, brilliant! Why haven't I thought of that sooner? Doesn't matter if I don't have one, I could build one!"

With renewed energy, she walked towards the stairs. She would probably have rushed right up if there wasn't the sudden push that hit her, nearly throwing her down again. One hand tightly gripping the wooden railing, she turned around, some wild lock of hairs covering her eyes. For once, she was truly lost for words.

"You can't go," Eleven said, a small drop of blood trickling from her nose. "Mike said you couldn't."

She watched on as the woman carefully stepped down from the stairs again, shaking her dizzy head. "Well, yes. I see. Just... just let me explain, Eleven, okay?"

"You can't go," the girl merely replied, her voice suddenly firm with a determination the woman had never heard – or expected – from her.

"Yes, I know that's what he said. But let me... look, I'm not plannin' on going anywhere, alright? I'm just going to see if I can find any materials I could use to build a screwdriver. I won't leave the house. Promise."

For some reason, she could almost see the girl reacting to that last word; as if there was something in her eyes that responded to it. Well, the strange thing was that it didn't even surprise her, because she remembered it as well, some kind of deeper meaning behind it that was somehow tied in with her own past. For once, she felt actual sadness for her own inability to remember. Being reborn was something, but not being able to recall her purpose, the meaning of everything that made up her past was somehow a thousand times worse.

"I understand that you're concerned about Mike and our safety. But this is my best chance at figurin' out who I am, understandin' the importance of the burden I carry with me and the lives that came before mine. Please, Eleven, if it's necessary I'll beg you not to deny me this opportunity."

It may have been her face, which all at once seemed so much older, or the heartbreaking sincerity which had sounded through her voice, but Eleven suddenly realized there was a strange order to the things around her. Not dissapointing Mike was important, but allowing the woman to help was vital, something that had to go above everything else. Could it be because she recognized something in her? Because she *remembered*?

The man with the box. There was something about him, not something happy, something sad. He never told you, but you could see it. Does this

woman have something sad too?

Well, maybe. But right now she was in an empty room, not one that was visible, and would it be fair to let her stay inside it? To not help her find a way to open the door, to not let her find out what was outside of it? To not help her out of the darkness and into the light?

Hardly.

"Okay," the girl said. "I'll help you."

"Oh, thank you so much," the woman said, and this time her smile wasn't just upbeat or cheerful – there was such gratitude in it that for a second, El was afraid her face would break open in intense brightness. There wasn't much time to reply, though; before she had even the chance of opening her mouth, the woman was already on the stairs again, wildly gesturing her. "Well, let's go then! Time to build a screwdriver!"

And Eleven followed, not once thinking about the rules again.

It was almost as if though the woman had never seen an ordinary house before (though Eleven couldn't blame her, after all, had she?) and now decided to take the full opportunity. She rampaged up and down through the ground floor, first to the kitchen, then the living room, to the corridor leading to the garage and back to the kitchen again. The little girl just stood in the middle of it all, fiddling with the buttons on the long sleeves of the ragged coat. There wasn't much else she could do.

"Right then!" the woman cheered as she pulled some of the drawers open. "Not havin' the benefit of havin' the TARDIS, dull environment, bit of time pressure, so we'll have to improvise a little. But that's no problem." She suddenly uttered a surprised cry, ducked and pulled something from under the kitchen counter. Turning to Eleven, she smiled: "Well, cheer up a little! This is going to be fun!"

She threw the girl a couple of eggos and ran around the corner. While El stuffed a couple of delicious waffles into her mouth, she tried to catch a glimpse of what she was doing. There sure was a lot of noise

as she... rummaged through the drawers to collect all the spoons? And the forks? Even the *knives*?

"There. That should be enough for the casing. Oh, could you hold this for a bit? Thank you, supergirl."

Apparently she had forgotten that certain things – especially a lot of *loose* things – weren't exactly holdable. She threw the whole bunch up to Eleven, who managed to just grab a couple of spoons and two forks while the rest clattered to the ground. The woman was already half through the living room before she realized her mistake. "Oh, here's me being silly again. Sorry about that. Let me fetch you a bucket,"

Eleven nodded and made sure to check under all the furniture before the woman returned, a steel bucket in her hands. The cutlery made a hollow, clanging noise as it fell on the bottom. Once filled, she laboriously carried it further into the room, where the woman just appeared to be taking apart the television set. "Oh, long time since I've fiddled around with such primitive technology. Look at that, it's just a box! A box filled with little bleeping pieces and lamps and funny things. Okay, better stay back, because it may end up explodin'."

"Exploding?"

"Yah. You know, when it goes boom. Well, I don't know, it *could* go boom, but I'll try my best to keep it short and clean. Just watch out."

Eleven quickly retreated, looking on a tad uncomfortably as the woman pulled a few wires and messed around with some panels. All of a sudden the tv started to emit a strange, humming noise. "Oh dear," the woman muttered, clearly looking nervous as she started pulling more parts from the machine. This wasn't doing much good, obviously, as the humming only grew louder, and apart from that there was now smoke rising from the top as well.

"Yeet! Okay, no worries, I should just give it a firm quick slap and then –"

Zap! There was a bright flash, then the woman's head shot back, hair

waving around it in some kind of blonde explosion. Eleven dropped the bucket and rushed toward her. Before she could reach her, though, the woman was already upright again – apart from some black streaks across her cheeks, she seemed to be doing remarkably alright. El stared. The woman stared. It took them exactly five seconds to burst into a bright laughter – the woman giggling like an excited child and the girl displaying what felt like her first real smile in ages.

"Toast!" the woman cheered as she held up a burned eggo, and that was enough for another five minutes of joyful laughter – five minutes in which they were no more than a bunch of children giggling about an exploded television. Eleven cherished those minutes – she wished it would never end.

Unfortunately it did, although she could count on a couple of more eggos as they took off to the garage. Once they arrived, the woman switched the lights on and dropped the wires and items she had carried with her to the floor. El put the bucket down as well, using her other hand to wipe the crumbs out of the corner of her mouth.

"Lovely!" the woman said, running around the room to look for any useful equipment. "There's nearly enough in here to build a proper sonic. Say what you want, but human ingenuity is brilliant. Oh, look at me, I'm rhyming!"

She rummaged for three more minutes before returning with a set of goggles and a cylinder-like machine. If Mike had been there, he would have explained to Eleven it was a "welding machine", the kind his dad had purchased with the intention to do some jobs around the house. (An intention which Ted Wheeler had, like many of his other 'ideas', postponed until an unimaginable eternity.)

"Okay, I seem to have everything in place. No, wait." She scratched her head. "I'm missin' something. Am I? There's steel, there's the electrical components, but I need... oh, stupid." Now she shook her head, letting out a deep sigh. "I knew I'd overlook something. Alien material! I can't craft a sonic semi-telephatic device without using a bit of extraterrestrial technology. Oh, shoot!"

She turned around, putting her hands on her hips as she tried to hide

the bitter disappointment on her face. It couldn't be right. It wasn't fair! Why did it always have to be difficult – why had there to be at least one big hurdle in the way when things finally seemed to be leading somewhere? She started to wonder whether all of this was truly a test. Could it be possible that she somehow got trapped in her confession dial again?

Suddenly there was something else; a hand tugging at her sleeve. She turned around to find Eleven standing there, holding some kind of orange-yellow crystal in her open hand. In the dimmed lights of the garage, it shone brightly and casted a beautiful shimmer on them.

"What is... where did you get that?"

"Yours," Eleven said. "Doctor."

"Doctor? That's funny. You're funny," she replied, a bit absently. She carefully put the crystal on the workbench and proceeded to put the goggles and a couple of gloves on. "Doctor, me? Could you imagine it? Well, no, but that's enough jokes for today. Now it's tinkerin' time. Oh, the beautiful alliterations! I should give Shakespeare a call and see if he's up for another round of wordplay! No, better not, he still hasn't forgiven you for beatin' him last time. Alright, Eleven, I don't want to be a party pooper, but I think it's better if you wait in the living room. It'll be safer there."

"Okay," the girl replied, though not sounding very sure. "Will you come back?"

"Hm?" the woman turned so that El was now being stared at by a couple of massive black eyes. "Yes, of course. Silly question. Do you really think I would leave you alone after all that you've been through?"

"Promise?"

"Promise. Yeah, if you want."

The girl rapidly nodded. Under the goggles appeared a broad smile – an honest smile. "Then you'll have my promise. Always. Now get out of here before I accidentally fry your eyebrows. Or something else."

Don't want to think about the things that could go wr –"

But Eleven was already gone before she could complete the sentence. For a second she just stood there, looking at the closed door; then cast one more glance at the crystal before turning the welding machine on. It certainly appeared her identity and Will's disappearance weren't the only mysteries that needed solving. As if those two weren't already unbearable.

On the other side... had it ever been that easy?

Eleven listened to the metallic *clunks* and *thumps* as she waited for the woman to return. She was sitting in the La-Z-Boy, looking around the room to study all of its interesting contents. It had taken some persuasion, but she was now fairly convinced the woman wreaking havoc in the garage was the same odd man with the blue box she had encountered that one night in the empty room. Only it was now a woman... without the box, and her memory, apparently. Eleven wanted to help her remember who she was, but at the same time she was also a bit afraid, just as she wasn't completely sure whether to trust her. Oh, there was the desire of course; after all, the man had promised to come back for her. But the fact that she had to make a new promise didn't exactly comfort her. It could be the memory loss, sure thing, but there were still things Eleven didn't clearly remember as well.

There are not only happy things about him. Also sad things. Also bad things. You saw it. In his face, in his eyes. Did you also see them in the woman's eyes? Did he fulfill his promise? How did you escape? Why has she forgotten you? Why has she forgotten the promise?

Amid this rowdy bunch of screaming questions was another voice, Papa's voice, so clear she could envision him sitting in front of her: *I want you to tell me about the man, Eleven. I want you to tell me his name. To tell me who he is. You can't trust him, Eleven. You can never ever trust him.*

She pressed her hands on her head and whimpered. Too many questions. Too many lies. She didn't want to hear them, she wanted to trust the woman. To help her to help them, and after that, see the

stars, the countless stars and the brightest of them all, but no more lies, no more –

"Are you alright?"

She shot up. The woman was standing in the portal to the corridor, goggles pushed up to her forehead. In one hand she held a weird, glinstering object, with a bit of the crystal on top.

"Yes." Eleven said. She wiped the bit of blood on her upper lip off. Hopefully she hadn't turned the whole upper floor upside down in the process.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." she said more firmly, and this time she noticed the woman frowned a little. She didn't reply to it though, instead choosing to shrug and walk up to her. "Okay then. I've managed to put together this nifty looking thingy. First time I've done this, so it might need some testin', but if I got everything correct we'll be able to trace the dimensional energy in no time."

She pressed on the object and it suddenly started to glow, emitting the familiar soft hum. Above their heads, the light started to flicker. The woman's face lit up and pleasure and she waved it around, turning on the rest of the lights, the radio on the drawer, even the microwave in the kitchen. The bag of popcorn someone had left in it exploded and started popping, adding to the loud orchestra of other appliances which started beeping or humming once the woman pointed the screwdriver at them. To her, it was a confirmation that the hurdle had been taken – another small, yet well-deserved victory.

To Eleven, it was magic.

The woman fiddled around some more before turning everything off again. She juggled with her new screwdriver for a put, then caught it and stroke it lovingly. "Seems like we got a nice thing rollin' here. Alright, let's get all of the mess cleaned up before Mike comes home. Wouldn't want to dissapoint him now, would we?"

Eleven shook her head. No, she didn't want to dissapoint him. After

all, this was an important thing – maybe not *the* most important thing, but certainly *an* important thing.

If just the television wasn't beyond repair.

11. Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Will and the TARDIS

Will groaned. He wasn't exactly sure of his surroundings (nor did he think he was very conscious about anything else either), although he could feel a distant pulsing at the back of his head. It wasn't his own heartbeat – which was so weak he could barely call himself alive – but in a way it still felt familiar to him, like it was part of some ancient instinct he had just discovered. It was pleasant to feel and listen to and since this was the first positive thing happening to him in what felt like ages, he took a moment to enjoy it, floating in the nothingness of his own mind. Soon though, the pulsing became more urgent – almost *itchy* – and he slowly felt it pushing him towards a bright light. It didn't take long for the light to take shape, *multiple* shapes actually, and soon he started to recognize them as the forms of the space around him – a pure mass of dark metal and more of those nasty black vines. Suddenly, the pulsing became an unbearable scream and his eyes shot open. He sat up, gasping, drawing deep, cold breaths as his eyes darted around the room. No one was there. The creature was nowhere to be seen. But still there was something completely off, though he couldn't quite put his finger around it. He was here. In safety. *That* certainly sounded like a damn near miracle in itself, but it wasn't particularly the strangest thing. This was the simple fact that he was standing in a room.

A damn room almost as big as a theatre completely made out of metal and strange round things and machines and O God where have I ended up?

He started to hyperventilate and reached for his inhalator, then realized he didn't have one. He wasn't even asthmatic. And if you'd think about it, it was pretty much hilarious. After all the horror he'd been through, everything he had seen, the thing that made him lose his mind was a room? *A room?*

Well, yes, but it was somewhat reasonable when it went completely beyond any normal human comprehension. The last thing he remembered was tumbling into a box that seemed merely big enough for three or four people. And despite the fact that his whole presence

here was the result of some strange inexplicable phenomenon, this was still the one thing that scared him the most. Had it been a teleport of some sort? A gateway? Was he *inside* the box?

It was all quite overwhelming and he felt himself losing his balance, but then the pulse suddenly kicked in again. As opposed to a minute ago it was now nowhere near subtle; it was a shrill, shard-like cry that went straight through his brain. He flinched and caught himself at a broken railing. Oh, the agony. Even after all *he* had been through, it seemed like the source of this screaming was in more pain than he ever had been. And yet he still wasn't sure where it came from. It wasn't even audible, in the way that you could hear words and have some vague understanding of where – or *who* – they came from. It was more... in his head. Was that right? Was he finally going crazy?

A new wave of mental screams hit him and this time, it was accompanied by a heavy metallic groan coming from the room around him as well, resounding from all the depths that lied beyond it. The sound was so loud that he tottered for a moment and he grabbed the keyboard-like panel to regain his balance. He wasn't sure whether that had done something, but the noise suddenly died down, dissolving into smaller, less louder creaks and ticks. The metal felt warm and almost a sort of soothing under his fingertips. And he could feel the pulsing again as well, like a kind of heartbeat. It could have been a bit far-fetched to think, but maybe... maybe he had been swallowed by some giant metal beast? Had he ended up in its belly?

Okay, no, maybe that wasn't it; but he definitely thought this thing was somehow alive. He didn't know why, he didn't know how, and maybe it didn't even matter. Maybe there was just the simple fact that this *thing* – wherever he had ended up – was a living, breathing organism and perfectly capable of feeling pain. Perhaps it had let him in because it needed him and the least he could do was at least trying to do something about it.

Keeping his hands on the panel and looking up to the shattered red column of glass, he asked: "Are... are you alive?"

And the groan came again, echoing through the chamber to all of its round walls and back. He flinched. That was more or less a

confirmation, yeah, but when it came to details, he wasn't so sure the machine wasn't even half alive. It touched him more than he thought it would.

"What are you?" he asked, and it took the machine a little longer to reply than usual. Instead of groaning sounds, there was now something else as well; a string of visuals, flashing quickly through his head. The box here, in Hawkins. The box somewhere which seemed to resemble Victorian London, if he had at least paid enough attention during history class. The box at the bottom of what appeared to be a lake and in front of a giant, smoking volcano.

"A *time machine*?" he gasped. And if *this* realization wasn't enough already, the screen at this side of the panel turned on, displaying the box in all sorts of environments he couldn't even recognize. A barren, red landscape. A snowy valley. A bleak, metal room and a giant red glowing ball? A sun?

"A *space-time machine*?" he gasped again, and the room whirled slightly in confirmation. It appeared the gift of information had drained the whole thing as the light suddenly started to dim and he found himself standing in half darkness. A little while later, the lights flickered and slowly lit up again, although less stronger than before.

"I can't believe it..." he says breathlessly. "I can't... how did you end up here? What happened to you?"

This time he probably didn't even need the machine to answer to him; he was pretty sure it was for the same reason he had ended up here. Maybe even around the same time. He didn't only feel connected to the machine on a telepathic level (and God knew how *that* was possible), but also on a physical level, sharing its ill state, its shivers of dread and pain.

"You miss someone as well, don't you?" he asked. "That's why you can't get out of here?"

The machine creaked. On the screen appeared a set of faces of people he didn't recognize; men with grey hair, with brown and black hair, one with blonde hair, short, tall, old faces, young faces, smiling, serious, plain mad. There was one woman amongst them as well,

although her image was a little less clear than the others.

"Your crew?" he asked. "Where did they go?"

A slight ticking this time. It sounded a little desperate: *I don't know*. He sighed, patting the desktop as he stared down at the vines slithering over the metal floor. "Yeah, I get you. I miss my mom as well. And my brother. And my friends. I don't know where they are or how to get to them. I don't even know how I got here,"

He let out a deep, desperate sigh. The machine remained silent, emitting its slow hum.

"Is that why you let me in?" he asked, looking up at the broken column. "So I could help you? Help you get us out of here?"

There was a funny bubbling noise and for the first time, Will was sure it sounded almost *positive*. He got up slowly, never taking his gaze off the column. "Really? Can you? Can you get us out of here?"

Nothing but the bubbly noise. Well, in all fairness, even if it couldn't, it was still a better place to stay than out there. This was probably the best thing that ever happened to him in his life and mom would surely insist he would at least attempt to repay the favor. *What mom would do...* that made him go both warm and cold. For the first time since he had spoken to her in that wall back at their house, he was getting in her proximity again, and he'd made sure he wouldn't let that chance go to waste.

"Okay," he said, taking off his body warmer and hanging it over the railing. "I will help you. Just... could you keep, uh, talking to me? It seems so long since I talked to someone."

A string of short bleeps coming from the panel. *No problem, boy*. Will smiled, and as he started to tug at the vines to get them out of the room, he had a feeling that things would soon start to look better, and maybe, just maybe, there would be a way out of this.

"Eleven, I would like you to tell me about the man,"

Papa looked at her with his cold, dark eyes. He was sitting at the

opposite side of the table, with nothing but the plain, white surface between them, though Eleven knew there were other people as well. They were watching them eagerly, standing behind the safety of their black mirrors. She didn't like any of them. Didn't *love* them. Not a single one. Except...

"The man?" she asked, trying her best to sound unaware.

"Yes, the man." Papa replied. "The man that broke into our home to steal our secrets, Eleven. The man that visited you."

She simply shrugged. His use of that particular word, home, angered her a little, for she was sure it was just another one of his many lies; this place had never felt like a home, although she could barely understand the meaning of that word. The TARDIS did, though, oh yes: the TARDIS with its beautiful blue colors and lights and magical world hidden inside it. Just the thought of it made her feel warm inside – though she made sure to not let see Papa any of it. She would not betray the Doctor.

"Eleven?"

"There was no man," she said, never losing sight of his cold eyes. He merely smiled – *he never smiles*, Eleven thought. She didn't know exactly what his expression was either, but it certainly wasn't anything positive.

"You know lying is a very bad thing to do, don't you?" he calmly asked, ticking with his fingers on the table. The girl swallowed. "Yes, P-Papa," she said, "but I'm not... I'm not lying."

"Oh, I'm sure. At least, I'm sure you don't *want* to, but the man *makes* you do it, doesn't he? We don't have secrets in our home, Eleven. Not for each other, at least. So I don't understand why you would keep anything from me."

She made sure to keep staring at him; as long as she didn't avert her gaze, he wouldn't notice anything. If she did, he would know she had lied. But oh help – it was such a hard thing to do, and Papa's eyes on themselves had something hypnotizing, almost as if they could see right through her.

"There was no man," she repeated.

Papa closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, he was staring at the blank surface between them, and she could not help but let out a slight, relieved sigh.

"I really don't understand why you don't trust me, even after all this time we have spent together," he said. "You must understand that I have always tried to help you, Eleven. To protect you. As I'm sure, you already know that there is a world beyond our home. But it's not a good world. It's an evil one, full of people who are trying to hurt you. The only reason why they haven't yet is that I have always protected you. But I can't keep doing that if you don't trust me, Eleven. *Trust*, do you know what that means?"

"Hope," she simply replied, and he frowned, but chose not to remark on it. "Trust is not keeping secrets for each other," he said. "Not lying to each other. Both of which are very bad things to do, you know that, right?"

"Yes Papa."

"Right then. But I trust you, Eleven, so I'm going to give you one more chance. Who was that man?"

Silence filled the room as she declined to give him any form of answer. It would not matter; she wouldn't tell him anything from now on. Seconds (or possibly minutes) crawled by as he kept her locked in his cold gaze, before settling back, a small grin forming on his face. "I see. You will understand that lying is a bad thing to do, Eleven. Very bad. Take her away,"

There was little time to respond as she suddenly felt strong arms grabbing her from behind and carrying her away from the chair. She kicked and cried (as usual) and watched Papa standing at the end of the hallway (as usual) with the empty expression on his face (as usual), though she did it all less furiously than she normally would. For some reason, the thought of having succeeded in not betraying the Doctor was very satisfying. She guessed it was part of the thing Papa had described as truth – not keeping any secrets from each other, not lying to each other, not betraying each other. She made

sure to keep kicking as they threw her in the empty room, even swiftly turning around to kick at the closed door, but as soon as she could hear their footsteps moving away, she smiled and relaxed back. *Done it*, she thought.

She turned around and was met with a sight that made her heart almost burst out of her chest. The odd man in his dark red coat was leaning against the back wall of the empty room, casually eating something from a cardboard tray.

"Quite the jolly fellows, eh?" he remarked, pinning something to his white wooden fork. It looked good. Smelled good as well.

"You came back," she answered, her eyes lighting up with renewed enthusiasm.

"Well, yes. Still haven't managed to fix our little technical matter, but that should be sorted out soon. It's got mainly to do with the strong telepathic field around this place." He chewed and pulled a weird expression. "You wouldn't say that that's the result of one little girl, honestly. Maybe there's something I missed. I'll figure it out. Anyway, I decided to check up on you to see how you were holding up. How have you been? Did they hurt you?"

She shook her head. Speaking carefully, to make sure she was using the right words, she said: "They asked about you. Papa too. He wanted to know who you are,"

"Oh, they wouldn't be the first." the Doctor replied, casting a quick smile. "Although I have to admit, it might be slightly more practical if they don't know exactly who I am. I seem to have quite an impressive record. Did you tell them who I am?"

Eleven shook her head. The Doctor smiled again. "I don't know what it is with you, little girl, but you seem to make me smile more than anyone ever could. Right then, the promise still stands. I will get you of here... one way or the other. Until then, I need you to stay strong a little longer. Could you do that for me?"

"Yes," she said, and she spoke with a confidence that almost scared her – she knew for sure that she had never been more certain about

something. Yet, it also felt so *good*.

"You are a very brave girl, Eleven." the Doctor said. "Here, have this. I have never been a fan of chips anyway,"

He handed her the cardboard tray and she immediately began to gulp down its contents, taking the crispy golden sticks with her hands and stuffing them into her mouth. The Doctor raised his eyebrows, but calmly waited for her to finish the meal. When she finished, she licked the delicious taste from her fingers, handing the tray over after doing so.

"That's that then," he said. "I'll be going now, but I will be back."

"Promise?"

"Of course," he smiled, and with that, he pulled out his blue object again – offhandedly remarking it was a 'sonic screwdriver' – and opened the door. He raised his thumb before closing it, leaving her once again in the cold empty room, although she had to admit it had never felt better. She carefully listened for the sound of the TARDIS and swore she heard a faint wheezing in the distance, although she wasn't entirely sure. Oh, but it wouldn't matter anyway. He promised to come back.

And she had no doubt he would.

12. Chapter 11

[A/N: First things first, to all my regular readers; I'm so, so sorry. I've been caught up in so much stuff for the past few months that I simply haven't been able to write and submit new chapters. Inspiration for other stories and fandoms has started haunting me as well, so I haven't really prioritized this story as much as I should have.

I have made a personal promise to myself that I would really finish this, though, so don't worry; we'll definitely come to the end. For now, I hope 2 new chapters will make up for all the waiting. We're slowly building up to the climax of the Doctor's adventures in Hawkins, so expect some exciting upcoming developments!

Thank you for all the incredible love and support 3]

Chapter 11: The Forest

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Mike woke up with a pretty good feeling about what today would have in store for him and his friends. They had not found out anything on the funeral other than what the woman had told them (and she seemed to think Mr. Clarke was quite an amateur as well, judging by her snarky response to his explanation), but at least they now had some kind of proper lead they could follow. When they got back, the woman had demonstrated a small nifty tool she had invented – apparently it was called a 'sonic screwdriver' – and Dustin had come up with a theory about a magnetic field they'd be able to track with it. Of course, the woman had praised him on being such a bright light – and boy, had he been proud of that, but oh well, perhaps they were now finally able to find out how exactly Will had disappeared to wherever he was stuck now.

And so, he walked down the stairs, whistling excitedly, and greeting his family when he appeared in the kitchen. "Hey mom, hey dad, hey Nancy, hey Holly, hey ma'am –"

He stopped dead in his tracks and for a second he was almost sure his eyes would pop out. "What the hell –"

"Mike, I'm sure I didn't hear any cuss words?" Karen asked, shooting him a warning look. He swallowed. "No, sorry, mom, I'm just confused –"

"Oh, I'm sure you are sweetie, but you really didn't have to hide the fact that you were seeing a counselor. Miss Smith turned up at the door this morning, she explained us the whole story. I must say, I'm very impressed. She's very professional, don't you think, Ted?"

"Mhm," Ted Wheeler mumbled, barely looking up from his newspaper, "women shouldn't be shrinks."

"Well, you've got something to look forward to, sunshine," the woman, sporting a sunflower-patterned apron, responded as she turned around. "Just wait a few more decades, you'll be listening to a female president on the telly,"

"Excuse me?"

"Ello Mike!" the woman cheered, changing subject with her usual swiftness, "Slept well? I sure did, even though it was just for five minutes or so – I don't tend to sleep that long. Might be because of the voices in my head. They sure like to keep me awake."

"Oh, miss Smith," Karen giggled. "Alright, people, time for breakfast! Are you coming, Mike?"

"Sure, Mom." Mike mumbled, attempting for the second time to catch the woman's attention, but she – again – seemed far too excited to notice anything. The Wheeler family began to eat their breakfast in respectful silence, before Karen, at the head of the table, looked up and asked: "So, if you don't mind me asking, miss Smith, how do you think Mike is doing?"

The woman looked up and replied, with a mouth full of baked egg: "Healthy, young boy, and quite persistent as well. Reminds me of a couple of people I traveled around with, although I couldn't possibly remember when I did that. Oh, and he's got a bit of an oddly shaped

face, so there's still the off-chance that he happens to be an alien, but I'll make sure to notify you lot in time if that's the case."

Holly giggled. Karen smiled: "Oh, dear, isn't she funny, guys?"

"Amusing." Ted mumbled.

"Yeah, hilarious." Mike snorted. "Look, Mom, miss Smith wanted to take me out for a walk today, I'm sure you're okay with that?"

"Well, if she proposed it, I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem. Didn't you say you were going out today as well, Nancy?"

"Yeah, I'm probably going to look some more for Barb," Nancy said.

"You'll be careful, right?"

"Of course, Mom."

"Who's Barb?" The woman asked, tossing the egg aside and taking a bite out of a sandwich. Nancy frowned at her, but still replied, shrugging: "A friend. We went to a party together –"

"Which she didn't ask permission for," Ted remarked.

"*Ted*," Karen said sharply, casting him a look.

"It's okay, mom. It was stupid, yeah, but anyway, she's still lost, and with all of this going on I'm worried something happened to her. It's been a couple of days and no one's found her yet."

"My my, you lot sure seem to have a problem with friends going missin' in this place," the woman said, taking a swig from a cup next to her plate. "Perhaps it would help if you all became enemies. No, hold on, that's a stupid idea."

The table fell silent. The only reply came from Ted, a couple of seconds later: "Inappropriate."

"Oh, but it wasn't *my* suggestion," the woman quickly said. Mike saw her raising a finger at Holly and hastily decided to interrupt: "Anyway, so, yeah, I really want to thank miss Smith for her help."

Yesterday was very difficult and her talks have really helped me."

"I'm sure they did," Karen smiled. "Although I can imagine it has been difficult, especially since Will meant so much to you... right?"

Mike nodded. He noticed the woman's face falling, almost as if it broke open from inside – it was that rare occasion when some deeper part of this strange person seemed to emerge, a part which truly frightened him because he had a slight suspicion it was the closest to her true face.

"Loss is a strange thing," the woman quietly remarked. "You won't ever get used to it. Never."

"Amen," Karen said. The conversation mostly died down after that, no one at the table feeling the urge – or capability, for that matter – to bring up a new subject. They finished their breakfast and each of the Wheeler family members went their own way – Karen went to do the dishes, Nancy brought Holly upstairs and Ted decided to spend some more time arguing with the battered television set. The woman offered to help, but he shrugged it off, cheering in victory as the damned thing finally flickered and started displaying a string of commercials (but only after the woman had secretly pointed at it with her screwdriver).

Once Mike was outside, having circled back to gather their gear and pick up Eleven, he returned to the woman. She was standing on a pile of brown leaves, hands stuffed into her pockets. As he saw her there, framed by the golden light of the early sun like some holy picture in an old book, Mike could not help but again wonder who exactly she was – where she came from. Why she instinctively had decided to help, instead of simply leaving them be to find answers to better questions. She had a ship. She knew more about space and dimensions and alternate realities than even the biggest geek in Hawkins. They had more or less accepted she was weird, yeah, but an alien? And how could it be she was so human-like, then?

"Doctor," Eleven said, and it was then he noticed she'd been staring at him the whole time. He asked what she meant.

"Doctor," she said again, and pointed at the woman. He shook his

head. "No, we don't need to take her to a doctor. She's been fine so far. But maybe later, if it turns out she's got a concussion or something... maybe that'll help her to get her memory back."

Eleven shook her head, but didn't reply. Not for the first time, he thought a bit about Eleven as well. Had there been a life before this one? Did she have a family? And was this somehow all connected... was there a *reason* that at the same time his best friend went mysteriously missing two of these... *strange* figures had turned up?

"Ready?" the woman asked. She didn't sound excited. There was a strange tone in her voice he hadn't heard before.

"Yeah," he said, "although I guess it wouldn't hurt if you asked me before you decided to meet my family without telling anyone. You could've blown up our whole cover,"

"Spouse."

Mike swallowed. "Look... is everything still alright with you? Back at breakfast, you sounded a little, uhm..."

The woman sighed. "Just a little tired, that's all."

"You sure?"

"When I said 'loss', I didn't just mean loss of a person, Mike. I also meant losin' in general. It'll probably sound a little difficult to you, but it feels like I'm constantly driven by fear these days. Fear of never rememberin' who I am, fear of losin' everything I have left – even though I'm not even sure what that may be – fear of never findin' your friend..." She looked up, her almost golden hair in a strange contrast with the distant expression on her face. "It's dreadful."

"Yeah," Mike answered, struggling to find the right words, "That, uh, that sucks."

They were left in silence, all three staring into the distance as the wind rustled in the branches of the trees above them. Eleven was the first to take action. She nudged Mike and he quickly shot up: "But, uh, of course you can do it. We believe in you. We all do."

"Oh, but that's not what I'm concerned about," she said, turning around with a smile. "It's just that I don't know if I can live up to it." She took the sonic out of her pocket, flipping it around a few times before holding it up, the children watching its soft, orange glow with big eyes.

"But I will try."

They met up with Dustin and Lucas and headed off to the woods. Once they reached the old, abandoned railway running through the forest, the woman took out her screwdriver and started tracking the supposed magnetic field Dustin had told them about. It had taken them a while, but finally she seemed to have found a sort of direction, which more or less aligned with the direction the tracks were running in. The boys quickly followed, Dustin up front trying to get some more answers out of the woman regarding her planet of origin ("Gallifrey"), her people ("arrogant and bad-tempered, most of the time") and her favorite food ("I just have an odd craving for custard... just no pears") before he soon found she wasn't in the mood for providing him with more colorful details. Lucas didn't hide the fact that he had his doubts about the whole plan – as usual – and occasionally casted a quick glance at Eleven, though no one seemed to notice.

The girl was unusually quiet herself as well. Perhaps it was because she was directing the full capacity of her powers at disrupting the magnetic signal to lead them *away* from its source. It was something she had been doing impulsively, from the moment they had left and the woman had activated her screwdriver. She couldn't risk bringing them close to the terrifying dangers she herself had barely managed to escape from – especially Mike. She didn't want him to get hurt. They were her friends, sure, but there was just something about Mike that caused this weird feeling in the pit of her stomach which she couldn't quite understand. The thought alone of something happening to him was beyond scary.

Or perhaps it was because of some different emotions she had been developing for the woman – and hold on, because this was a tad confusing to her as well. But she swore she felt actual *distrust* for her. It wasn't the same kind of distrust she felt for Papa, because that kind

was entirely rooted in fear, but this was something more in the direction of... disappointment, perhaps. And the strange thing was that it had not even been a sudden feeling; perhaps it had been there all along. The feelings of trust and excitement had just been a little stronger, until now. But why? Why couldn't the woman be trusted? Why was she *disappointed* in her?

And so, she led them in the opposite direction of the gateway, but what was about to happen in the next few minutes was beyond anything anyone of them could have ever anticipated.

They arrived at what appeared to be some kind of junkyard – it was a terrain littered with old trash, plates of rusty steel, carcasses of all kinds of cars and the wreckage of an old school bus. The woman arrived first, frantically waving her sonic around which started to emit a stuttering, whirring sound as the light started to flicker. "Oh no, *come on!*" she hissed, frustrated, as she shook it up and down and inspected the crystal.

"What's wrong?" Dustin asked, quickly joining her as Mike and Lucas walked around to inspect the rest of the place. Eleven came to a halt a few feet behind them, quickly wiping off her upper lip.

"Lost the signal. I'm tryin' to get it back but it's so... it's weird. Almost as if it has never been there."

"Is the portal here, then?"

"I'm seeing nothing at this side," Mike yelled from behind a rusty car frame. "Just loads and loads of trash."

"Same here," Lucas responded.

They spent some more time searching, although it rapidly became quite clear they wouldn't find anything. The portal was nowhere to be seen, nor, according to the woman, any trace that indicated it had ever been there. Eventually they all gathered in the center, the woman still walking in circles around them, trying to pick up the signal again.

"So what do we do now?" Dustin asked.

"Well, I mean, I think it's all quite clear what happened, don't you think?" Lucas snarked.

"What do you mean?"

"It's her," he said, pointing to Eleven. The girl didn't cower this time, simply standing there, tracing the arms of the woman's ragged coat. "She's the one blocking the signal. She's been misleading us the whole time!"

"That's bullshit!" Mike yelled. He looked to the woman for help, but she had lowered her screwdriver and bit her lip with an uneasy expression on her face.

"It's not. You know it's not. She's been acting weirder than normal. If she can slam doors with her mind, she can definitely screw up a magnetic signal!"

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she's trying to sabotage our mission. Because she's a traitor!" He stepped towards Eleven, Mike screaming for him to come back, but he didn't listen. "You did it, didn't you? You don't want us to reach the gate. You don't want us to find Will."

"Lucas, come on!"

"I saw her wiping her nose on the tracks! She was using her powers!"

"Bull! That's old blood. Right, El? El?"

"It's not- it's not safe." Eleven exclaimed, her eyes starting to tear up.

"You lot, I think that's enough," the woman tried to interrupt, "Let's just calm down for a minute and –"

"What did I tell you? She's been playing us from the beginning!" Lucas yelled.

"That's not true," Mike said, "She helped us find Will!"

"Find Will? Find Will? Where is he, then? Huh? I don't see him. Just

think about it, Mike. She could've just told us where the Upside Down was right away, but she didn't. For God's sake, even the woman helped us more than she did! She just made us run around like headless chickens!"

"All right," the woman said, raising her voice as well, "calm down!"

"She used us, all of us!" Lucas went on, "She helped just enough so she could get what she wants. Food and a bed. She's like a stray dog."

"Screw you, Lucas!" Mike shouted, the raging anger becoming quite clear in his voice now as well.

"No, screw *you*, Mike! You're blind blind because you like that a girl's not grossed out by you! But wake up, man! Wake the hell up! She knows where Will is, and now she's just letting him die in the Upside Down! For all we know, it's her fault!"

"*Shut up!*"

"We're looking for some stupid monster, but did you ever stop to think that maybe *she's* the monster?"

"I said, *shut up!*"

Mike suddenly lunged at Lucas, the boy barely being able to raise his own hands before they started wrestling. The woman gasped. "Knock it off, you idiots!" Dustin yelled.

It all happened within a matter of a few seconds. Eleven finally moved. She raised her hand just as the woman ran to the fighting pair to pull them apart. The woman let out a surprised yelp as she saw her feet lose their grip on the ground. Both her and Lucas suddenly went flying, soaring through the air as Mike and Dustin screamed. Lucas landed rather painfully on a plate of steel; the woman seemed less lucky. She landed a couple of feet further, disappearing behind a pile of scrap before she hit the ground and most of her body went limp. She tried to get up. Wouldn't work. Nothing seemed to work. The last thing the woman heard were the terrified screams of the boys, echoing in her head, before she lost consciousness and total blackness settled before her eyes.

13. Chapter 12

Chapter 12: Revelations – The Raggedy Woman

The machine's strangely sentient presence was comforting and Will worked harder than he had probably ever done before (save for maybe that time when he had helped patching up the shed after it had had a encounter with a fall storm), but it soon proved to be a hell of a task. Every time he managed to get one of the black vines out, another one would pop up again, crawling and slithering over the broken panels of the dimly lit room. His own hunger and fatigue began taking their toll on him as well, seemingly making his feet heavier with every step. Soon he felt like he was running on nothing but the taste of his own sweat and tears. But he had another treat, though – his undying will to not die in this horrible world, and the realization that his mom and his brother would be heartbroken if he didn't get out of here. *That* was one thing he particularly wanted to prevent and so he kept working, cutting vines and hauling them out the door until his limbs went numb and his head felt like cheap Jell-O.

Finally, he decided to settle for some rest and he sat down against one of the chairs in front of the console. The machine hummed calmly, emitting its strange, pulsating glow. Will had at least deducted that it wasn't from around here as it was one of the few things that hadn't tried to kill him yet – he had tried to venture further into the rooms, but each time he passed through one of the corridors it simply looped him back to the control room again. He wondered how it got stuck here, what had made the crew go missing – perhaps it was the same thing that had brought him here. In that case, he dearly hoped they weren't dead yet.

"So where are you from anyway?" he asked. The machine groaned a single odd word: *Gallifrey*. Sounded exotic.

"Yeah, I'm afraid I don't know that one." he said, then paused. "I'm from around here. Well, not *here*, I mean, but from Hawkins. This place is kinda similar to it, but it's just so... evil, you know?"

The machine hummed approvingly. Will wondered what kind of evil

it had witnessed. Whatever it was, it probably hadn't been as bad as the situation it had landed itself in right here, much like himself, actually; alone, cold and hungry, without his family and friends... and he could only hope they were looking for him. Of course he knew they were trying, but how did you find anyone who was in a sort of – well, he supposed *different dimension* was the right word – other place you couldn't possibly reach normally?

The realization that the answer had been right in front of him was just beginning to catch up with him, actually. It was a time-and-space-machine after all, so surely it was supposed to be able to fly him out of here – but the question was whether it really *could*. Even though it rumbled to life every now and then, flinging mental waves filled with strange expressions at him – *he's my doctor, oh dear what will become of him without his sexy* and *I should have taken him to the ice cream place instead* were just a few of them – it still seemed in great pain, and then he hadn't actually considered the actual technical damage. What wasn't covered by black vines was either hanging loose from the ceiling or blown to bits. Sometimes Will could hear a loud distant explosion coming from inside the machine, and big rains of bright sparks would spring up around him; in addition to all his bruises and grazes, he now also had a few burns to grit his teeth to.

He honestly didn't know how long he could last. Had it been a day since he escaped from the monster? Two days? A week? Would it ever come back? He thought it would – sometimes he would hear these eerie, scraping noises from outside the door, and in those moment he would always retreat to the far back of the room, cowering in fear as he waited for the sounds to die down. He didn't know why it still bothered anymore, there was little left of him to begin with. He was afraid since he had had moments where he actually *wanted* to walk outside and allow the thing to grab him – it would be painful yes, but it would be less painful than starving to death.

No, he thought, I can't. Mom is waiting for me somewhere. Jonathan is waiting for me too. And Mike, and Dustin, and Lucas – they're all out there looking for me, waiting for me, imagine how afraid and heartbroken they must be...

"I miss my friends," he said. "And my family. Can we go looking for them? Can we go looking for your crew?"

This time the machine didn't respond immediately – Will don't know whether it was considering his request or if it simply lacked the energy to respond. Finally, though, it emitted a single blast which made his head tingle: *Maybe. We might. Help me, Will, Help me and we can try* –

He couldn't believe his ears. Was it really true? *Could* the machine help him? He shot up, felt an unbearable pain in his lower back and was about to collapse back to the floor again before he reached out to the panels and re-established his balance. The machine briefly hummed – it sounded worried. *Be careful.*

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he grumbled. "What... what do I need to do?"

Well, listen carefully. Even my pilot can't seem to get it right most of the time and the likeness that we'll just explode is astronomical at this point, but if you listen carefully, we'll be out of here before you know it.

"Well that sounds great, bu– Wait, What did you just say?"

But the machine didn't respond. Will looked up to the bright blue column, sighed deeply, and went to work.

The woman didn't know where she was. When she was. Who she was. The only thing she remembered was a sharp pain that had shot through her head like an arrow, and after she had woken up, something strange had happened, but not particularly something good. She had started to remember things – cold, dark memories started flooding in like some kind of evil epiphany. She remembered the pain, the people she had lost, the lives she had destroyed, and the gaps in her memory started filling up until the realization struck her with a great, numbing force.

She was a monster. The most evil kind in the entire history of existence, quite possibly. She had destroyed civilizations, torn families apart, gambled with the lives of innocents – and in the center of it all was the simple reality that she had always failed, that she

hadn't even managed to find a *child*. She couldn't even remember her own name, and suddenly she didn't even know whether she *wanted* to – was there even a name that could describe this... this failure, this horrible monstrosity, this evil?

And hours after walking around in the darkness, the woman sat down to do something she hadn't done in a long time – she *cried*. She simply sat there at the edge of a dark road, burying her face in her hands and sobbing while the moon casted long shadows around her. *Why?* She wondered. *Why me? Why have I been given a second chance? Why did I chose for yet another live to waste? Were twelve failures not enough?*

No, not twelve. Thirteen. Thirteen voices, and they all screamed deep inside her; *me, it's always been me. All those people, all those companions... they all fell into your trap, you monster. It's a sickness you can't cure, a curse you can't lift. You'll disappoint them. Eventually. And then, you kill them.*

The woman cried and cried until she had no tears left, then screamed. At no one, just at the cold, damp air and the emptiness which had enveloped her. Once her throat felt like she was breathing through a cluster of nails, she stopped and simply looked to the ground. Didn't think about anything. The world had gone silent, and in silence she would rest.

Well, until the voice suddenly piped up, of course. It appeared behind her and nearly made her go into a paralytic shock. "Well, Doctor, I must say I haven't seen you so riled up before. The womanly hormones have definitely gotten to you, haven't they?"

The woman turned around to see a young woman looking at her. She was wearing a simple black cardigan and a red skirt. Her face fringed by brown hair bore a striking resemblance to one the woman had seen in her memories, although she couldn't exactly recall her name.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"A friend. Well, used to be, now I'm just here to give you a little push in the right direction, since it looks like you could use it. Call me an implausibility if you want, at least, that's how we met."

"I'm not..." The woman frowned. She didn't know how it was possible, but the right memory actually seemed to present itself, so easily it was almost scary: "Impossible girl?"

"There you go," the impossible girl smiled, finally sitting down in the grass. She crossed her legs and said: "Well then, now we've got *that* part out of the way, I think you should look down."

The woman did as she was told. She didn't know why, but she didn't know why not, either. Once her chin had reached her chest, the impossible girl raised one hand and gave her a firm smack across her left cheek. The woman yelped, quickly regaining her balance as she started to tumble backwards. "Why did you do that?"

"Just making sure you're clear and awake. I've seen you struggle with post-regeneration sickness before, but it wasn't as worse as it is now. Sometimes I'm really wondering why you keep dragging on with this, you crazy old fool. It's going to end up being the end of *you* some day."

"I was actually just thinking about that," the woman somberly admitted, "wonderin' what a beautiful place the universe would be when it has finally gotten rid of me. I think it would take some time to adjust, but imagine all the peace and hap –"

The impossible girl slapped her again.

"*Would you please stop that?!"* the woman yelled.

"No. Not until you stop talking nonsense. Or return to your usual kind, at least. The universe won't become a better place without you, Doctor. Quite the opposite."

"You wouldn't know. I failed you as well."

"No, you didn't," the impossible girl said, gently gripping her arm. "You know, I used to hate you when you were like this. All grim and depressed and feeling bad about yourself, just because you would realize even you aren't perfect."

"You're talkin' about it as if it's a light thing. You don't feel the weight of countless dead souls pressin' on your shoulders, you aren't

constantly hearin' the screams of those you caused pain... *you don't keep seein' the faces of all those people you failed.*"

The impossible girl raised her hand again, but the woman grabbed it, fingers firmly wrapped around her wrist. "But please," she said through gritted teeth, "tell me I'm wrong about that as well, Clara."

"No, I won't," the impossible girl said, wriggling her arm free. She had barely flinched at the woman's strong grip. "But I'm going to tell you you're an incredible narrow-minded idiot for only remembering the bad parts, Doctor, which you always seem to do whenever you need to feel sorry for yourself. It quite fits the ego, but you see what it ends up doing to you. And honestly, don't you think it's about time you get over it?"

The woman opened her mouth, then closed it. Something else had begun to struck her, but this time it wasn't a memory of death or failure – it was a memory of her previous lives. The most recent ones, to be exact. Lifetimes she had spent coming to terms with the grief and the pain.

"I remember killin' you..." she mumbled.

The impossible girl shook her head. "No, don't you dare going there again, idiot. It was *my* choice. The only reason why you kept blaming yourself for it is because you wanted to – and that's honestly always been your problem. Choosing to fly off with that old box was one of the best decisions you've ever made, but it somehow also made you think that you have a responsibility of saving every living being in the universe. And you can't, Doctor, you know that. But what matters is not the people you could have saved – what matters is the people you *can* save."

"I suppose that makes sense..." The woman blinked. "But it's still the fear that's holdin' me back, Clara. Even after all this time – even now we've come this far... I'm still afraid of bein' too late. Of not bein' able to find that boy, or the pain I'd be causin' his family..."

"Except that all of that hasn't happened yet. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. It keeps you running. But once it starts dragging you down, you need to stop for a moment and *think*, Doctor. After all, do

you remember the entire point of you being here? Do you remember what you've told yourself?"

The woman stopped to think for a second, then remembered. Inside of her, an old familiar voice spoke up, one she immediately recognized: "Hate is always foolish."

"Exactly." The impossible girl smiled. "That was meant for you as well, Doctor. Hating yourself is foolish. You've spent a good amount of lifetimes doing that. So how about you throw all of that aside and allow yourself some love, for once? How about you go do what you're the best at – saving people?"

"I would if I could just remember my own name. Or have a clue about where to look, for that matter. I don't even know where all my little mini-humans have ran off to."

The impossible girl laughed. "You really haven't listened, have you?"

"Course not. Why would I want to listen to other people? They usually don't have much interestin' to say anyway,"

She couldn't help it – self-pity just wasn't a realistic option anymore at this point. The impossible girl had proven that enough to her, alright. And for some reason everything she had mentioned didn't even sound new or at least foreign to her; it was as if some other part of herself had stood up to the other part, pushing away at all that misery and self-hate. She wasn't here to fail, or to sit down and feel bad about herself – she had wasted enough time doing that.

The impossible girl smiled yet again, mumbling "There you go," as she reached forward and hugged the woman – the Doctor. Leaning over to her ear, she whispered: "You know why you are here. You've known it all along, you dummy. This place – the girl, the disappeared boy – can't you remember?"

"I... I guess I do... but I'm havin' so much trouble rememberin',"

"It's really not that hard. It's right in front of you. You just need to go back to where it all began."

The impossible girl let her go to point to somewhere in the distance.

The Doctor looked across the road, and far away over the treetops she could see the bright, distant cluster of glimmering lights. She carefully got up, absently brushing the grass off her clothing as she stumbled forward. The words echoed within her head like some kind of mantra – *where it all began, the little girl, the disappearing boy... you've known it all along, Doctor. Can't you remember? Can't you remember when you found the poor little thing cowering in that cold, empty room? Can't you remember how angry it made you? How you swore to save her – and you did, Doctor, you did save her!*

"O." The Doctor stood in the middle of the road, clutching at her hips, as if she had suddenly been struck by lightning. Then she nearly fell back, raising her hands in some kind of euphoric gesture, and she emitted another shocked breath. "O!"

"Is it finally starting to get to you?" the impossible girl asked as she approached the woman with a big smile.

"Oh dear, yes, it's incredible – it's like my mind is suddenly blown to a thousand pieces, which I guess is a bad thing, but it's all comin' back to me now." She snapped her fingers. "Oh, brilliant! I know where my TARDIS is! Well, gettin' there is going to be a slight problem, but I 'spose I have done the impossible before."

"Of course you have. That's why you're here, Doctor."

"Yes, good point. Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I would rather get going – I've already wasted enough time. Goodbye!"

The woman started to ran off, small strips of her clothing waving behind her as she disappeared into the darkness. Not even ten seconds had passed before the impossible girl heard her frantic breathing again, however, and the Doctor suddenly appeared again, blonde hair fluttering around her face. "Sorry, just one more question – I'm afraid my sense of direction is still rebootin'. You wouldn't happen to know the right way, would you?"

Giggling, the impossible girl pointed in the right direction.

"Thank you." The Doctor went to storm off again, but came to a halt last minute, briefly staring to the ground before looking up. "It just

had to be you, didn't it? My mind couldn't come up with anyone else?"

"Well, sure. But you probably figured I would be the best person to slap some sense into you," the impossible girl responded. "But enough lingering about in the past. You've had plenty of time to do that now. Go be a Doctor, and save that boy."

"I will." The Doctor finally smiled, turned her head towards the road and then back, mouth open to say something, but by that time, the impossible girl was already gone. She looked around for a second, as if to look for anyone who could give her her cue, then realized she needed none.

She was the Doctor. She saved people.

And she *would* save them. She took a deep breath and started to run, disappearing into the nightly darkness.